INTO THE VALLEY: VOICES I HEARD ALONG THE WAY

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Into the Valley: Voices I Heard Along the Way contains a preface and a collection of five short stories. The preface discusses the use of voice as a technique to develop characters and create authenticity through elements such as sentence structure, diction, dialogue, and regional, cultural, and/or gender-specific affectations to make the words on the page become audible language in the mind of the reader. Each story is written with a unique voice that presents characters who struggle to come to terms with the truth and its various shades of reality.

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PART I

PREFACE

I have a confession.

I am afraid of finishing this thesis because it signals the end of an era during which I was allowed to call myself a writer…a title I crave dearly, even though I have yet to be published in a non-school sponsored magazine (no offense to the *North Texas Review*). It is an irrational fear, I know. I suppose the words will come when I am ready. I'm not sure that I am ready, even now, but the time has come to dive in and worry later about getting wet.

Characterization and Voice

When I begin to consider an idea for writing a story, it can take months (sometimes years) of cultivation and coercion to get to the place where a distinct voice will emerge. Sometimes, though, a voice will come out of nowhere, whispering some perfect first line in my ear, demanding to be written down. Without the right voice, stories seem stilted, hollow, or flat. With the right voice, a story becomes rich, genuine, and unique. Voice is the key to characterization and one element that gives authenticity to a story. Capturing voice is much like deciphering a code: by using the right words the right way, you unlock imagery in the reader's mind and other sensory perceptions that go along with "hearing" a story, to make the experience significant and hopefully unforgettable.

The definition for "voice" is elusive due to the fact that it contributes to various facets of writing, creating a definition that is often intertwined with other writing techniques like tone, persona, or most often, style. It is often used synonymously with "style" as in "Voice is the author's style, the quality that makes his or her writing unique

and which conveys the author's attitude, personality, and character" (Weihardt), or "voice. n. the distinctive style or manner of expression of an author or of a character in a book" ("Voice"). It could be argued, however, that style is a more broad technique, of which voice is one aspect, and that voice is not necessarily limited to "style" nor does it necessarily reflect the author's attitude or personality. Style is an overall form of expression, while voice is much more specific to speech. Voice, through the use of elements such as sentence structure, diction, dialogue, and regional, cultural, and/or gender-specific affectations, can be used to make the words on the page become audible language in the mind of the reader, and through this, create characters who develop into "real" people as the story unfolds.

Of course, the characters who are doing the telling in fiction stories aren't real, but that shouldn't matter so much…it should be, if at all possible, a fact that is forgotten immediately. The characters have to seem like real people. The reader has to care about them. More importantly, the characters must seem like real people to the writer, so much so that writing may be more like trying to give birth to a full grown Athena out of the top of your skull. David Huddle says you have to put flesh on your characters and that "you want to have a character who's come to life so clearly and compellingly, that as a writer you have to bow down to that character's inclinations, rather than just pulling the puppet strings" (44). Voice is one tool a writer has to set some humanness on to a character's frame. It can, when used as dialogue, reveal a bounty of character details including socio-economic class, education level, age, regional origin, temperament, and personality.

Because I want characters who seem like real people, I also want my stories to sound like autobiographies—to have that feeling of confession, that feeling of truth. The confessional quality I am trying to capture should make the readers feel like they are witnessing an upheaval, as if hearing some testimony to life by the person who lived it. I want to capture the reader's attention in the same way "based on a true story" captures moviegoers and reality TV fans. If I have done my job as an author, through the voice of my characters, the story will magically become authentic, genuine, or at least believable, even if it isn't based upon actual events. In a story with a first person point of view, the voice of the character is the voice of the story and further dictates the tone of the piece. The reality of the first person point of view story is that the whole story is actually one big monologue by the narrating character. This makes voice a significant aspect of the story, since it bears the storytelling.

Perspective and point of view are the main conveyance of any character or narrator's dialogue. These things—how he or she sees the world—are additional methods for dressing a character in flesh. Personality is the combination of point of view/perspective and attitude/tone. When given the character's reaction to some set of inputs, you have created a real person for the reader to understand via diction, tone, dialect, and finally story.

What the character says is as important as *how* they say it. The character's voice should be distinct to the personality that the character embodies. As the creator of the character, I have to know who my characters are—I have to get inside a character's head to understand perspective, motive, and rationale. When you have a character who has come to life, the hardest part of writing (for me) is taking yourself as

the author out of the character's speech. The whole story has to sound like true speech patterns belonging to just one person in order to make the story flow and possess authenticity.

In Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." the narrator, referred to only as "Sister" in the story, is talking to someone who has stopped by the post office about her family and recent events leading up to what caused her living conditions:

> "Stella-Rondo just calmly takes off this *hat,* I wish you could see it. She says, "Why, Mama, Shirley-T.'s adopted, I can prove it."
>
> "How?" says Mama, but all I says was, "H'm!" There I was over the hot stove, trying to stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child into the bargain, without one moment's notice." (46)

Sister's voice is distinct and her personality comes through in nearly every sentence of the story. She is jealous of her sister, Stella-Rondo, and feels sorry for herself, all of which is implied in her speech. Welty has used diction, sentence structure, word emphasis, and pacing to characterize Sister as this woman who would divulge her personal family dramas to the casual listener at her place of work. The language brings Sister to life, as well as Stella-Rondo (at least from the perspective of Sister), by her attitude and reaction to the situation.

In my attempt to understand how to capture uniqueness, such as Welty's writing embodies, I am led to pose the question: where do the voice of the author and the voice of the character/narrator merge and diverge? How can I hide myself in the story without revealing my voice? Where does the voice come from if not from me? I am telling parts of my own story, spliced together with other bits of randomness to disguise the truth and fill in the blanks left by deleting what I do not want you to know. Yet, to make the story still sound authentic, it has to be told in such a way that you believe the

story does belong to someone. Maybe it doesn't belong to me anymore, but to this entity I've created to carry on with the story I am purging from myself. The story becomes the surrogate to my experiences through which the truth can develop and grow into its own thing. It's like turning a single strand of yarn into something as wide and substantial as a good winter blanket.

There is some core truth to each story I write that is mine and has driven me to write it down—to give it more weight and substance than just a thought in my head or a sore spot on my heart. By giving it voice and sharing it with others, I can finally release it from myself. This can be especially hard if I've held on to it for a very long time, as if the thing has worn a groove in my mind, requiring much effort to pull it away from its familiar gravity. The things I have trundled around for the longest time are the things imprinted most gravely with "me." These things I have to acknowledge in a different way—as deserving to be told in my own voice. No amount of trying to disguise them into the mouth of a character will succeed. It simply does not ring true and falls flat with the absence of authentic voice.

Here is an example of inauthentic voice from one of the previous versions of "Into the Valley," in third person, limited point of view:

> Mainly he didn't complain because he'd read the U.S. Army Survival Manual three times straight through. His favorite chapter was the first: The Will to Survive. The key was learning to ignore bodily discomforts and understanding the psychological responses to survival stresses. The book made it sound like if you wanted to survive badly enough, you could will yourself to survive Hell itself. Of course, it would be best if you had at least half a canteen of water.

The exposition regarding the main character is flat and lifeless, lacking a voice that conveys anything aside from straight facts. The intent was to show the character's conscientiousness and desperate want to survive, but instead of "showing" this

language only “tells.” The last line was a weak attempt to add some personality to the lifeless paragraph, especially since it does not reflect the character, but my own smart-aleck sense of humor.

When I am able to step back from my own writing and look at things with a critical eye, I have come to realize that failure to achieve authenticity happens most often when my voice is unintentionally coming out of some character’s mouth. Not only does inauthenticity render a story unbelievable or unrelatable, it also makes for dull storytelling because every character will end up sounding the same as the last. Now, I do realize that as the creator of my characters, they will necessarily be created in my image and there will always be traces of my attitude evident in them. But to impart a personality to a character that a reader can identify with is the accomplishment of successful author. According to David Huddle, “As a fiction writer, to have a character come to life in language is the great achievement” (44).

I must confess that all of my characters sound like me to me. I tap into my latent schizophrenia and call forth a different aspect of myself to make the words sound legitimate. I obviously prefer not to confess my own ugliness as myself, Amy Barth, but as Nolie or Carla, my characters. My own doubts about the difference between my voice and my characters’ voices are echoed by Peter Selgin: “When it comes to dialogue, the distinction between your own internal voice and those of your characters may be a false and therefore deceptive one, since after all they are as much a part of you as Adam’s rib” (101). I know that I am probably not fooling anyone by hiding behind characters, but maybe I am fooling myself and that is what matters in getting the story out. Maybe it doesn’t matter how I go about it, as long as I do it. Voicing these things

through the mouthpiece of a character is still voicing them, nonetheless. I believe this is the thing that drives us to be storytellers, what has made the tradition and craft of storytelling continue and develop through the history of humankind.

Although I call these voices from somewhere inside myself, most of my characters voices are borrowed from people I know. Mister Vicky is a friend of a friend whom I met at Jazz Fest in Denton and with whom I became instant buddies. He lavished me with praise and made me feel like a beauty queen even though he prefers boys. When the first line of "Mister Vicky" came to me, I heard his voice speaking. In "Pretty Stones," there is a collection of people I've known in my life, little girls whom I babysat, myself at age 7, a conglomeration of my aunts, an imagined gruff grandfather who didn't know how to relate his emotions to anyone.

Kolana/Birdy Jane is the only voice that came entirely from somewhere inside of me…she was an internal voice that kept coming to me whenever I thought about war from a female point of view, which would make me think about Florence, Italy, which would make me wonder why I was thinking about a place I'd never been before, which boosted my notion that reincarnation is real and that I might have been a nurse during World War II. She is likely the best representation in my writing of Selgin's theory that "all dialogue is between the self and the soul" (101).

Nolie's story, "Twenty Cookies," is the one story in the collection told in third person limited point of view. Her voice in dialogue and the voice of the piece is mine, disguised very poorly and not at all to people who know me. "Into the Valley" was a story that became a journey unto itself, but it is the one story told intentionally in my voice and from my perspective.

Authenticity

Authenticity is what gives a story believability, regardless of how it may differ from the truth. It is a process, something you build as the story progresses. My intent in creating authenticity is to bridge the gap between fictional character and true humanness. When this gap is closed, or at least narrowed, I hope the character I have created seems truly like a real person. Lee Smith's Appalachian stories have been noted as having "such an authentic voice that you might imagine having known her characters all their lives" (Jones). I want this level of familiarity between character and reader. Voice is the mimicry I have my fictional characters use to become plump, juicy people, just like the ones we see in the mirror every morning.

The process of building authenticity lasts until the last word is on the page and the final edit has been completed. I have written pages and pages of stories that later had to be set aside because the authentic voice came only after I had gotten to know my characters better. It can be difficult to let go of so much writing because you can grow attached to what you've spent so much effort creating—you want it to remain as part of the whole. The reality is that all work spent on a story is part of the process, part of the whole, because it enabled you to arrive at the end product. Patricia Henley says of her novel, *Hummingbird House*, "I abandoned 150 pages and started over because…[a particular scene] provided me with the first line and the stripped down, close to the consciousness of the character's voice. Once I received that first line…I wrote the manuscript in 10 months" (7). During the same interview, Henley says, "Once I got in the groove—once I found the voice the story required—the writing unfolded" (7).

I have had the same experience with stories telling themselves once the voices were captured. The voices carry the truth, not in fact or detail, but in the sense of authenticity, commanding whatever situation may be presented in the story with a perspective unique to someone who intimately knows the situation. I have asked myself, what is it that creates authenticity in a fictionalized character's voice? How do I make the reader believe and care about the characters?

Initially, I must try to get the reader's attention with a good first line. The first line must represent the character in terms of diction and tone that will be carried throughout the whole piece. Voice must do the work of characterization as it does when we meet a person in real life, revealing their thoughts and attitudes about what is happening around them. How a character deals with the situation at hand will reveal their perspective. So much can be revealed about a character by the type of speech used, which topics get attention and which ones don't, how a topic is discussed or what is omitted, the emotions revealed or hidden, disappointments masked or victories savored. Whatever the elements used in the narrative or dialogue, the reader should make assumptions about the characters based upon this voice. These cues will lead the reader to categorize the character in some way. After the initial impression is made, it is then the work of the story to deepen and enrich the reader's relationship with the character, just as it does when you become more familiar with someone you have just met. Often times, the impression made by the first line will be greatly adjusted and modified once you understand the character's "story," once you hear their confession—the where they've been and what they've survived changes the whole. The reader

should have some emotion for the character, good or bad, based upon what the voice presented to them.

Authenticity is also achievable by following the adage: write what you know. When I was younger, I could not grasp how this was good writing advice that everyone should follow. It seemed so limiting and boring. But now I understand the limitation was self-imposed. I chose the literal interpretation, thinking I had to tell stories set in places I had lived before with characters doing things I had done before. It seems so obvious now that the things I know are so much bigger than physical actions or locations. The experiences I have had give me a basis of knowledge about people and perspectives, enough to recognize that there are varying degrees of truth encompassing many different points of view; most people think that their version of reality is the only one. However, through writing, I came to realize that “the truth” is a relative term.

“The truth is relative” has become something of a motto I use to remind myself that perspective changes simple things, like right and wrong, that many people take as being black and white issues. Such extremes don’t really allow for the messiness of a human life, or understanding the motives that drive a person to make the choices they make. The way I remember my life is my truth. My brother remembers the same events from our childhood in a different way that is no less true than my memory. My parents, yet, have a different outlook on these same events: different from my brother’s and mine, and different from each other. This is how the distinction of personality and perspective shades what a character sees, says, reacts to, or ignores.

The Results

The journey to “Into the Valley” as it exists today began in 2001. I never would have imagined that it would take five years to write one story. The story that began as fiction actually warped itself into something more like a non-fiction essay. In all honesty, when I began writing, I never imagined a story could warp itself into anything, but that I would be the one doing the warping, the honing, the pounding on the anvil until the blade was sharp and true. I realize now that it is exactly the opposite. Not until I let go of what I wanted that story to say did the right words come and the story become what it was meant to be. I realized that what Grace Paley said was true for me: “You write to say I don’t understand this. I’m going to try to understand it. I don’t know” (18). And if you pay attention, your own writing will show you what you were looking for.

The original “Into the Valley” was about my dad’s experiences in Vietnam. I had to make up the story almost entirely because my father will not tell me anything about what happened to him there. Nothing but small details. I wrote this story because I honestly wanted to understand my father’s point of view, the why he is the way he is. I wanted to write about grit and blood and fear and how people make it through, damaged, but alive. Unfortunately, my lack of experience and knowledge guaranteed that any version of Vietnam I held up to the world would fall pitifully short. I borrowed from movie stereotypes and books I had read, but the voice of the story was never right and never would be without a drastic alteration to the story. I was breaking the “write what you know” rule.

I’ve read “Into the Valley” only once to a small crowd of friends and fellow students. I was only able to get through it without tears because I was charged with the

electricity and power of realizing its truth. I had just finished the most drastic edit (close to the version it is today) mere hours before the reading. I had been swilling bloody marys to get up my nerve for the reading when it came into focus. I started cutting lines and chopping out whole sections of the story, suddenly knowing they didn't belong anymore. I wrote like a fusion reaction, the words coming together as if exposed to the perfect catalyst (vodka and tomato juice?). I let it roll out of me without censorship, without imposing my wish for what I wanted it to be.

"Into the Valley" is about being shielded from something I wanted to see, something other people could see without even trying. The answer was scattered all around me like a puzzle I had to piece together on my own. From the initial conception of this story, it took me about three years to accept the truth of this story: "Into the Valley" is not really about my father. The point of the story and the whole reason I wrote it was *because* he could not tell me about Vietnam. No matter how much I imagined war and the emotions one would have to face, I could not capture the depth of reality needed to make the story work. There was no way for me to present a confession that would alter or deepen the narrative voice as the experience of war affected the main character because that is exactly what I was grasping at, begging to understand about my father. I realized that I could never tell his story. I couldn't even come close. All I really had was my story.

Whether I liked it or not, this story needed my personal voice as the narrator and it had to be told from my point of view. Authenticity would be achieved no other way. I tried to use a confessional tone for my own telling of the story, providing the puzzle pieces of evidence I had collected through the years. The confession starts with the

first line, explaining that the only thing my dad could give me of his true self was a dream. I continue the confession by revealing what I know: he can't say what he might want to say, he can only show. He has his reasons for omitting me from the first-hand information source, whatever they may be, but he makes sure I can get the second-hand information if I want it. The thing he did give me was the biggest and best thing he had to give, materially speaking.

Directly opposite to such a personal narrative is "Twenty Cookies." It is the only story in this collection written in a third person limited point of view. Originally, it was meant to be a confession about bulimia and feelings of shame surrounding a divorce and a rape. But as I wrote it, the main character, Nolie, could not bring herself to talk about it. At least, I couldn't hear it that way. I decided to try a third person, limited point of view: limiting the story to Nolie keeps the reader inside her head and close to her thoughts. Dialogue is used to compensate for the lack of the first person point of view "witness" and to help establish her personality.

The first line begins with a very matter-of-fact statement that reflects Nolie's practiced, pokerfaced approach to her life and people around her. While she is relatively good at hiding her emotions from her sponsor, Marlene, she is completely consumed with the pain of her life. Her struggle is revealed immediately in the story as the forefront of what is going in her life. The explanation for Nolie's situation is a confession to a priest that is actually a non-confession to the truth. Her shame and guilt are so great that she cannot even bring herself to speak the truth, not to herself, not to anyone.

She has very little compassion for herself, holding herself to some ridiculously high standards, backed with shame and stubbornness. She uses cynicism as a shield. Nolie doesn't actually say very much at all in the story, but spends a lot of time in her own head, going over things, categorizing and shifting her thoughts and actions until they make some sort of sense to her, no matter how illogical they may be to someone looking in from the outside. She is on the borderline of all things and exists in a general state of voicelessness, until the end. I want the reader to understand that she relives the events that changed her life, all too often, and attempts to distract or punish herself for being the woman who let her life spin so out of control.

Even though she can not bring herself to say what actually happened, and even though she is still blaming herself for the rape and everything that followed, the particular confession that does occur is a breakthrough for her. It is the first time she even came within the ballpark of what actually happened to her. It is so important, even such a tiny step, just revisiting the events were cathartic enough for her to decide to go home and reclaim control over herself again by destroying the symbols of her Achilles' heel—the other conveniently packaged twenty cookies. She can finally manage to deny the trigger of her behavior and put it on public display throwing away cookies, one by one.

The voice and tone used in this piece was meant to be misleading, using humor as a deflector, as people who are emotionally wounded sometimes do in order to cope. The truth is still there, though. The tone of the piece changes significantly when this truth appears, the pacing picks up, and any hint of humor evaporates like Alan's truck

from the parking lot. The altered character, after the confession, also must be reflected by yet another voice, to indicate the change. She is sobered, but back in control.

The reader only sees Nolie coping with one day of her life, a day in which she is feeling guilty for relapsing into self-destructive behavior because of twenty Girl Scout cookies. Does Nolie really change after this day? Probably not. Will she relapse into self-destructive behavior? Almost certainly. But this story is about a snapshot of a process, and hopefully I have captured that day in the life of Nolie Walker authentically.

Another story which captures a snapshot of a character is “Lying Raven.” In this story, a combat nurse during World War II faces the pain of loss intrinsic to the duty she serves. The first line reveals a quiet voice providing first-hand witness to the very close threat of war. From a first person point of view, Kolana speaks to no one but the reader who has access to her internalized dialogue. The story wanders from past to present like memories do, and attempts to capture the abbreviated speech patterns reserved for self or letters between intimate friends. She is telling herself these things to pass the time, to settle herself, to practice the truth before she has to face it, to set down the things she wants to remember, to revisit the past that can help her cope with what she now faces.

She has a dual identity: Kolana is her given name and means “raven” in the Cherokee language, but her father and her colleagues call her Birdy Jane. Throughout the story, memories of home flood her mind and they are juxtaposed with the bittersweet experiences she has had in Italy during the war. Her story is peppered with childhood memories, prophesies from her Cherokee mother, and remembering Jack Mallory, a soldier she loves.

I was inspired to write this while wondering what it must be like when the lights are off and you haven't yet or can't fall asleep, and you are faced with such atrocities on a daily basis…where does the mind wander? This voice attempts to bar nothing from the reader except that which Kolana cannot admit to herself, a theme shared with "Twenty Cookies." I wanted to capture the intimacy of internal thought, the matter-of-factness in language when we have no one to hide from and nothing to hide, pleasantness competing with harshness.

There is a "that's the way it is" quality to the voice and a uniqueness that defines Kolana's personality as pragmatic, yet open to mystical experiences. She is sweet and quiet, yet decisive and competent. The line that most defined Kolana for me was her chanting of "don't move, don't move, don't move," while her pants and socks were soaked with the blood of Jack Mallory before she knew who he was. I could hear that voice so clearly, pained with desperation and worry, yet blended with focus, commitment, and hope. This is the basis of her personality. She represents a duality of passive and active, grounded and fanciful. Her counterparts and only superiors are her mother and the fellow nurse, Sadie, who represent the extremes that she could encompass if she was required to do so. Her friend, Robin, is just as lost to her as Jack Mallory and they both represent the life she wishes for herself, but believes she will never have.

The confession of Kolana's story reveals that the prophesies she so wants to believe in come true, and yet, are dashed almost in the same breath. She finds in Jack Mallory the "man who calls her name unknown" only to lose him mere days later to shelling that hit the hospital, killing the wounded who were in recovery. She avoids the

truth, lying to herself, which she very well knows she is doing, pretending things might still be the way they were just days ago. But the time comes when she can no longer avoid it. She seems resigned to the reality, to the pain and hole that will be left by the loss, but she needs to mend her heart, patch her own wound, before she can move forward.

"Pretty Stones" is another story about a duality. Maryanne and Carla are bound by sisterhood and shared experiences, but one carries the burden of death while the other carries the burden of life. Carla must cope with being left behind by her immediate family, while Maryanne must deal with staying behind in death for her sister. Maryanne is the narrator of this story and she has a quiet voice with simplified language in order to reveal her age (around 9) and the simplicity of being raised in a rural setting. While her voice is conversational at first, recalling concrete details about her Grandfather and his fondness for "pecan chaw," a sadness and longing develops in her voice as the story continues, reflecting her situation in life and death. The trying family situation that drew her close to Carla created a connection that remained after death. Maryanne has lingered in the physical world out of loyalty and compassion for Carla, and Carla is the only one who can truly sense her because of the closeness that exists between them.

I wrote this story from the more literal interpretation of "write what you know." I set it in east Texas and had the girls do things that I have done: picking up pecans, walking railroad tracks looking for stones, and trying to become invisible when bad things happen. The confession that Maryanne makes is the obvious one—she did not

survive the rattlesnake bites—and the less obvious one: she has chosen to stay because she is Carla's protector.

This piece along with "Lying Raven" and "Mister Vicky" are linked by a common theme of loss and survival, of love and discord. In "Pretty Stones," Carla and her grandfather are adversaries. I wanted a narrator who was not involved in the personal conflict, but who could somehow sense the connection of pain that traveled between Carla and Grandfather because she loved and pitied them both. Although it was the loss of Maryanne that continued to fuel the pain, her remaining spirit chose to stay longer as an attempt to protect Carla from her loss and to help her find a resolution with Grandfather. Ultimately, Maryanne has to take a background role in the daily life of Carla, but she is not leaving her sister anytime soon.

In "Mister Vicky," two more adversaries appear as Mister Vicky and Dana Grayson. Dana Grayson is also, in effect, a ghost in Mister Vicky's life—she is the one woman he truly loved, but who could not love him in return unless he surrendered his manhood for her. The story is introduced by the first line: "So, my cross to bear in this life is the fact that I am a lesbian trapped in a gay man's body." This line perfectly introduces Mister Vicky to the reader, hinting at his outgoing nature and affable attitude, as if he just tapped out a cigarette and asked for a light before casually stating this to whoever flipped their Bic.

Even though Mister Vicky seems forthcoming, his flamboyancy is really a mask. The character is actually hiding behind this voice to avoid revealing that he has been wounded for life by the loss of his love/adversary, Dana. The stereotypical voice of that associated with a gay man is what Mister Vicky uses as a "default" voice to avoid having

to explain who and what he really is. His expressions are overtly dramatic, albeit descriptive, which is the technique he uses to hide the pain and frustration of a half-fulfilled life.

Mister Vicky focuses his attention on others: the girls he teaches dance to, his girlfriends, Dana, and his dog; even when he is the victim of a brutal assault, he'd rather focus on his friends. He spends a lot of energy creating multiple layers of the same story that we get to hear bit by bit as the story unfolds, preferring the glossed-over, "everything is fine" version to the truth. His confession comes when he is pressed to explain himself, which is how the reader hears about his past and present full of fears and heartache. Despite the pain, however, Mister Vicky just picks himself back up again, puts on a happy face, and returns to the voice of exaggeration and humor to continue on.

By the end of the story, we realize exactly what he put on the line in the name of love, but that he could not bring himself to pay the price. What seemed so simple to him at one point—like such a no-brainer compromise with Dana Grayson—cost him, literally, who he was and his ability to pursue his life's passion. The life he leads in the present is not without its problems, but it is a place of relative comfort. He can live vicariously through the girls he teaches and maintain a sense of peace knowing that he is loved by his friends.

In the End…

Eudora Welty explained her ability to use voice in her stories as having an "ear" for language and being able to assimilate the conglomeration of things you've heard in

snatches here and there into a unified, seemingly real character on the page. William Faulkner was a master of creating character voice as well as narrative voice, with a range encompassing everyone "from sages to children, criminals, the insane, even the dead—sometimes all within one book. He developed, beyond this ventriloquism, his own unmistakable narrative voice, urgent, intense, highly rhetorical" (Norton 1524). Flannery O'Connor is noted as "going about her storytelling…creating southern figures whom her imagination could bring to concrete life, and who spoke a vividly colloquial language she could handle superbly" (Fitzgerald x).

I must have, at some point, taken the stories told by authors like Welty, Faulkner, and O'Connor into my mind as the kind of stories I want to tell. Once I sat down to write stories seriously, though, I found myself rather clueless about how to go about it. I finally settled on following those threads of ideas in whatever way pulled at me the hardest. Finding the true nitty- gritty of any story, however, came only after I focused on making the writing "sound" right and developing the narrator's character. Not until much later did I become concerned about authenticity as my own sense of what qualified as "good writing" developed. Voice became my key ingredient for characterization and authenticity. The stories that came out of this technique are the ones included in this thesis.

I'm not sure what is going to happen to me as a writer in the future. I get paid to write technical documents now. It pays the bills and my desk has a nice view, but it all seems so hollow and soulless. There is not much craft beyond word-smithing a few poorly written techie sentences into something that sounds like English. I certainly don't get to apply a voice anywhere except in my head as different story ideas whirl around,

waiting for an appropriate release; they make it as far as the bottom of my purse: scrappy notes written on the backs of bills, messages to my future self that I hope I will find again someday.

The five stories in this collection are, I hope, just the beginning of a long line of stories I will craft someday. I hope my skills will grow to embrace more than the technique of voice, and that I might someday be able to worry less about authenticity as a means to defend my words. I hope for the ability to embrace the thing I pursued at UNT outside the boundaries of classroom walls. I want to put my energies into finishing that other collection of stories with the adversarial theme, but I am afraid that some part of me will just shuffle it away like so many scraps while I busy myself with building relationships and a family and a house and etc.

I read that Eudora Welty stopped writing for fifteen years while she took care of her mother and brothers. Learning this fortified me in some way for an unknown future, one in which there will be time enough for writing when there is time again for writing. I don't think I will let go of something that has always been so close at hand and heart, but the question is: will I do more than just hold on to it? Will I pursue it as I believe I should, chasing that dream of "making it" as an author…one who could support herself and her family with her art? I don't know. I think I still have a lot of fears yet to overcome, a lot of life yet to live, a lot of observations yet to make. Maybe writing itself will help me arrive at these things. Maybe if I ever find my own voice, it will be that much easier to translate characters to the page like so many Athenas bursting forth to stand there, fully grown and battle ready.

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PART II

STORIES

Into The Valley

The only thing my Dad could ever give me from his other life—the who he was before he got broken by Vietnam—was a dream…perhaps the only dream that survived intact through the swamps and jungles of Cambodia, the rice paddies and hamlets around Tay Nihn. The only thing that clung to him as he ripped open the air with his M60 in the shadow of the Black Virgin Mountain was a picture of a car. It was creased into quarters…a glossy page from a hot rod calendar from 1968, October. All silver and chrome, black leather interior, with a mean set of pipes and a glass-pack muffler, this Oldsmobile Cutlass SX (the one with the 455 engine) was going to be his when he got home. It was a beauty…a cherry…a mother fucking bad ass son of a bitch car.

There is a picture of him in some dim cinderblocked bunker holding up this picture and smiling. Really smiling, you know? Not just one of those picture-taking smiles, but a real soul sparkler. And I can't imagine him that way. I can't imagine him with that untainted, unpained light in his eyes still agleam with something akin to hope or innocence. Of course he smiles now. But there is always sorrow and regret behind it, always a spark that can easily smolder into anger.

When I was a kid, it was a rare night if my family made it through the evening without some sort of angry shouting match. Usually something happened at dinner to upset my dad. Something like running out of ketchup.

"What do you mean we don't have ketchup?" This was the beginning—the signal for my brother and I to hunker down in our chairs and act uninvolved, invisible.

"I guess I didn't realize it was so low. I can get some tomorrow." My mom was the Queen of Calm.

There'd be a moment of silence when all you could hear was three of us chewing, maybe a scrape of fork on plate. Then, the roar.

"How the hell am I supposed to eat french fries without ketchup? Why'd you even make french fries if you knew we were out? You could have made mashed potatoes or baked potatoes or scalloped potatoes, but you made french fries. And there's no ketchup?!" He would push his plate away and stare at her.

"I didn't know, Denny. Do you want me to go get some?" She put her napkin down on the table, and though her voice still sounded calm, her lips started to quiver like she was going to cry. And that made me want to cry. But she was brave enough to meet his stare. All I could do was keep staring at my plate.

"Oh hell no, Nancy. I wouldn't want you to do that. I'll go. Please let me go get the ketchup we should already have. I'll be the one to eat my dinner cold." And he would stand up real fast and knock over his chair. We all jumped when it hit the linoleum. "Goddamn bastard chair!" he would growl, shoving the chair back into the table. Then he'd stomp out of the kitchen, into the garage. Most of the time he would come back inside after a few minutes, silent and sorry, but unable to say anything. Sometimes he would drive away, the muffler of his Oldsmobile so loud you could hear it from three blocks away.

It took me a long time to figure out why my dad was so mad. I had heard the word "Vietnam" many times and overheard a few stories I probably wasn't supposed to, but it was all grown up talk to me and didn't make much of an impact. Until Mom said Dad should have gone to counseling for his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"What's that?" I asked.

“A lot of people who fought in wars have it. It means they saw too many horrible things and now those horrible things keep making them feel bad…like they might still be at war.”

“So, Dad saw a lot of bad things? When he was in Vietnam?”

“Yes he did. It was very hard and your father is very brave.”

Of course, from that moment on, I wanted to know what happened. I wanted to know why he was brave. I wanted to hear the stories and who his friends were and what the jungle was like and did he fly in helicopters. And I knew right away that he had killed people. That he had killed a lot of people probably. I knew from photographs that he had a really big gun—that in those pictures he went from the smiling boy with the picture of the car to the scowling, sad-eyed man I recognized as my dad.

Once I asked him about it…I said something like “What happened to you in Vietnam?” And he looked at me like I was speaking in tongues.

“I don’t want to talk about it” was his curt reply. And he never did talk about it to me—not then, not now. I mean there are constant things he does, remnants of war he carries with him that are everyday. There’s this one cadence they taught him at boot camp that he still sings around the house sometimes when he is in a good mood and making a sandwich or scooping ice cream for himself: “I wanna be an Airborne Ranger, live the life of guts and danger. All the way! Airborne!” This is really ironic because I know he hated the endless riding in helicopters—he told me once when we were watching “M.A.S.H.” that he was afraid of falling out when they banked too steeply. And one other time he showed me a scar, a permanent crescent moon-shaped bruise on his shin that he got jumping out of a Huey into a patch of bamboo. One of the stalks

apparently jabbed him pretty damn good. I don't know why he had to jump into the bamboo patch. He didn't ever say anything else about it.

It seems the only reason he will not say more to me about what happened to him in Vietnam is the fact that I am his daughter. What that means to him, I'm not quite sure: That I'm a princess with super-delicate sensibilities and cannot survive the harshness of his war stories? That if he told me the truth of what happened, I would respect him less and reject him as my hero? It's not because of my femaleness, because I know Mom heard everything, and probably all of my aunts, too.

And what's more frustrating is that he talks about it with plenty of other people. Any man may hear at least snippets of his war stories without a request or advance appointment. Any male, even a perfect stranger, will potentially hear some detail I have never been told while standing in line at McDonald's or drinking coffee after church. I have always thought the dominant requirement is maleness. My younger brother, four years my junior, is my most reliable and rich source of Dad's detailed Vietnam stories. Even my ex-husband (whom he disliked and distrusted from the beginning) heard the most savory, impressive stories. Why strangers? Why his son? Why his detestable son-in-law? And not his daughter? I wrote him a letter and asked him to share that part of his life with me. I needed to understand what made him so angry and controlling, so paranoid and so wounded. I have yet to receive a response letter, although was promised for years. The last excuse he gave me was, "I'll write you that letter when I get my new desk stained and finished." The "new" desk is seven years old now.

So, this is the story I made up from what little I know, from all the dregs of all my memories. This is who my father was in Vietnam:

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His number one survival stress was not being tired or hungry or sore; it was being wet. It was rare not to be wet every single day. Wet like taking a shower with your clothes on kind of wet. His feet were always white and wrinkled, squishing inside his much too wide boots. The medic warned against jungle rot, prescribing all of them to change socks and underwear as often as possible while they were in the bush. But no one wanted to be caught with one leg in, one leg out on the trail. The enemy was out there waiting for that exact moment of vulnerability, ass hanging out while you changed shorts, to strike with grenades and a hail of gunfire. No one did anything without cover—didn't eat, didn't sleep, didn't take a shit—unless you had at least one guy scanning the shadows for Charlie.

He always felt watched in the jungle. Always felt foreign eyes boring into the back of his head, staring down from some sniper's perch, impassively marking him like a man-shaped paper target. It made him itch between his shoulder blades—made his scalp crawl. Even while he carried the biggest machine gun assigned to men in the bush, *he* felt hunted. He couldn't run, call time out, or throw down his rucksack and quit; he had no choice but to keep moving down the dank paths, stuffing his fear down into his chest where it would slowly hollow him out.

He used his peripheral vision to watch for movement in all directions, sweeping his eyes around constantly, breathing silently through his mouth, while also keeping his feet on the path straight ahead. It seemed like that jungle had every shade of green God had ever thought about, creating such a multi-layered effect it played tricks on the eye. Every shadow could be a curtain hiding the black pajamas of the VC. Every palm

leaf turning in the breeze, flashing the sunlight, was transformed into a face or a gun muzzle or a dog tag. He expected land mines and booby traps on the forest floor or places where spiked sticks might swing down out of the trees. He tried not to imagine losing his own head, or parts of it, but he couldn't help it. Images would flash through his mind unbidden—a wooden spike through his right eye, a hole in his cheek big enough to fit his fist, a piece of shrapnel slicing off his nose, or his lips, or like one dead VC kid he saw, his whole jaw just gone.

Once he made sergeant, they immediately dispensed with his given name and called him simply Sarge. They always gave him shit, though, for two major reasons. One, because he had such a young face—looked like he was 16 and couldn't grow a mustache if his life depended on it. And two, because he wrote home nearly every day, packing a week's worth of letters to mail when they got back to base camp. Whenever they bedded down, there he'd be, hunched under a poncho, blond head bent close to the page writing with a government-issue ball-point pen in one hand, a flashlight in the other. His buddy—his cover man—was a guy from Sacramento who was big time into cars. Mike Daly was his name. They got to be real close friends—hit it off like brothers. Daly smoked Camels and watched the perimeter while Sarge wrote. They'd often play rummy, telling stories about girls and cars until LT told them to knock it off and go to sleep. Daly was a whiz at fixing jammed guns and the radio when Jackson got it wet in a river crossing or a muddy trench.

He and Daly were a team—the best in the platoon. They were usually the first to sight the enemy sliding through the trees. They'd quickly hunker down side-by-side, Sarge shooting off rounds and rounds of ammo, Daly aiming his "liberated" AK-47 with

uncanny accuracy, moving in the same direction without speaking. LT told the rest of the platoon to watch Sarge and Daly, to keep their eyes peeled, and they might just get out of this shit hole in one piece. Daly laughed about it once over cards, “Between you and me, I figure one of us is going to lose a limb walking point so often. That’s when I’m going to call in all my IOUs on these ass-wipes—they can pay for my peg leg.”

When they had a longer stay in base camp, it was different than on the trail. One group of guys got in the habit of playing poker for C-rations and beer and black market porn magazines while the rest of the platoon would scatter, either getting drunk or high or both. Sarge just seethed with anger when those fuck heads went off and smoked weed or hash or whatever they could find, largely because he was always nervous, even at base camp. He thought every man should be aware enough (at all times) to defend his own life, not to mention the lives of his fellow soldiers if the need arose. It wasn’t uncommon for base camps to be over-run since the NVA had started the Tet Offensive. One camp about 10 clicks from them—the 402nd Division—got the shit kicked out of them because three of the guys on perimeter duty were jacking off, not watching their line, high as kites on some shit.

LT tended to look the other way, but Sarge would have absolutely none of that getting stoned shit on the trail. So, if he found anything, he’d take it away like some third grade teacher saying he’d give it back when they got back to base. But of course the rain ruined whatever it was in his rucksack—he didn’t wrap it up on purpose.

As was common for the platoon, Sarge and Daly were walking point, communicating the way practiced soldiers do, using slight hand signals and head nods.

He could smell an ambush and it had his flesh crawling in the cool green of the thick canopy's shade. His intuition told him to stop the line and consult with LT. Daly lifted one eyebrow at him, paused, then knelt, agreeing with the assessment. Sarge raised a fist in the air and everyone behind dropped to a knee on either side of the trail, keeping watch in their immediate area. He slowly moved to the rear of the line, leaving Daly on point.

"I've got a feeling something's waiting for us, Sir. The bend in the trail ahead is blind to us on the right and the foliage is so thick, I can't see daylight on the other side. The hair on my neck is standing up, too, if you believe in those sort of things," he reported, looking at the spot in question no more than 60 meters ahead of Daly.

"You're right, Sarge. We'll move off the trail, 20 meters or so, move in a line to the northeast and see if we're talking a handful or a whole slew of the sons of bitches. You take the left, I'll take the right," LT suggested quietly, adjusting his helmet and checking his clip. They moved in opposite directions, crouching low and making as little noise as possible, conveying to each man along the way the planned action.

Daly looked at him as he approached and nodded his understanding. Each man in the platoon quickly disappeared into the thick foliage, stepping carefully and slowly, holding guns at the ready. With senses heightened, Sarge imagined he could smell the VC ahead of him, over-riding the musty odor of the jungle floor with their garlicky sweat. His eyes were wide open and slightly bugged as he tried to define every shape in the shadowy underbrush, scanning for any evidence of enemy presence. He knew Daly was to his right, so he concentrated on his center to left. That's when he heard voices speaking in sing-song nasal syllables. Daly heard it, too, halting his forward progress

and signaling down the line with the perfect “chee-chee brripp” imitation of a tree frog chirp, conveying the enemy detection.

They crept forward ready to fire on the enemy. The only thing that struck Sarge as odd was why they would be talking so loudly if they were trying to pull off an ambush. The talking stopped abruptly and he froze, as did Daly. They held their breath and stood completely still. Whoever was down the line from them was silent as well. For a split second, they were both irrationally afraid they’d been abandoned and would have to take on all the Charlies by themselves—that’s how eerily quiet it was. Then they heard it. Airplanes. Jets. Bombers. Right overhead in one loud whoosh, they went over, and then the sound was gone as fast as it had come.

The VC reacted to the sound at the exact same time and began to yell at one another in a panic. Sarge and Daly instinctively backed away quickly ducking behind trees one at a time, then they ran to their right, where the rest of the platoon should have been. They caught up with Cord, then Abrams, Doozy, and Jackson.

“Weren’t you with LT? Where is he?” Sarge asked in a loud whisper.

“I dunno. He was here a minute ago,” Jackson said, panting, leaning a shoulder against a narrow tree.

“Did you hear them?”

“Charlie or the planes?”

“Both.” Sarge was kneeling now, motioning for the men to do likewise. He tried in vain to see the sky through the dense treetops. “Did you call the friendlies and ask them where they were going? I hope to hell they aren’t circling back here. They’ll get us all if they’ve got the right coords.”

“I called in our position, Sarge, but got no response order,” Jackson said.

“Did they say anything at all?”

“To get the hell out, Sir.”

“Shit, Where is LT?” Sarge felt his heart leap in his chest, but he ignored it. He had to stay calm. He began fishing for a topo map in his front pocket to figure out the best way out of this situation, hopefully by finding a nearby landing zone.

Then they heard LT calling to them in a desperate whisper, off to the right, “Jackson! Sarge! Daly!”

They followed his voice as a tight pack, crouched close to the ground, swerving around trees in unison, like a giant spider. Then they all stopped short. LT was in a hole up to his ears, and looked as if he had fallen through the jungle floor. He was in a punji pit—they had been used by locals in the area for catching wild pigs. The basic premise is to dig a deep pit, imbed two dozen or more sharpened sticks in the floor of the pit, cover the hole with camouflage, and wait for the prey to fall in and impale itself on the sticks. More and more often, though, the pits were serving double duty as a trap for pigs and booby traps for soldiers. They all feared the worst, seeing in their minds the sharp punji sticks piercing his skin, skewering soft places, propping him upright as if he were a living scarecrow.

“LT?” Sarge asked cautiously.

“I’m okay. Get this thing off of me.” LT’s head disappeared beneath what they realized was a woven grass mat. They lifted it, finding the LT standing in an 8 x 10 foot pit, a little more than 5 feet deep. There were no sharp sticks, no grenades, no wires, no mines, no tunnel holes, no snakes, not even any standing water.

“What the fuck is this?” Daly asked. “LT, you okay?”

Wait. I have to interrupt. This is one story I did get to hear first hand. I was about seven years old, sitting on the covered patio of our house after dinner with a group of aunts and uncles. I remember the men were drinking cold Schlitz beers and the women had margaritas. When all the aunts and my mom went to do the dishes, I stayed swinging on the porch swing listening to Dad talk to Uncle Marshall and Uncle Bo. I’m pretty sure he didn’t know I was still out there. He told them a story about his unit finding a pit that was not booby trapped (to their surprise) and how finding it was a stroke of luck because of what happens next.

There were no sharp sticks, no grenades, no wires, no mines, no tunnel holes, no snakes, not even any standing water.

“What the fuck is this?” Daly asked. “LT, you okay?”

The man nodded. “Give me a hand out of here.”

That’s when they heard the planes again. And they panicked. They were too close!

“Get in!” Sarge yelled.

He pushed in Cord and Jackson who pushed in Daly and Doozy, who pushed in Abrams. Sarge jumped in after them. Under the pile of men, LT could be heard howling about what the fuck were they doing and get the hell off of him and that’s an order. Then they felt the first bomb hit. A rumble beneath them sent their spines tingling with an awful instinct to flee now, dirt clods falling around them. Silence. Then

like a fireworks finale, a barrage of constant booming exploded all around them. Dirt rained down. Then leaves. Then pieces of splintered wood. Then the trees began to crash down all around them and they could smell the green smoke of the burning jungle. Then it was silent.

"Holy shit," someone said.

"Holy shit, indeed," LT said, gasping for air under Jackson and his radio. "Are we alive?"

None of them were injured, everyone seemed fine.

"Okay, now get the hell off of me," LT commanded, squirming awkwardly to gain his own feet.

Sarge spoke up at this point. "Don't they usually make one more pass?"

They uprighted Jackson to get at his radio. LT called desperately over the airwaves for them to stop the bombing, friendlies were in the area. Get a medevac to the nearest LZ. That's when Sarge sprang into action.

"Where is everyone else?"

"Air support is on its way—there is an LZ one click from here to our West. That's where the Medevac is coming to get us," LT reported.

"Medevac?"

"I guessing someone's probably hurt up there," LT said with a shrug.

"I'm going to find the rest. We'll head to the LZ, okay?" Sarge heaved himself out of the pit, and tried to gather his bearings in the now burning, smoky, broken jungle.

"Be careful, Sarge," LT said.

"Hand up, Sarge?" Daly said, intending to go with him.

As Sarge reached down for his friend's hand, he suddenly realized he was hearing gunfire. He looked up right as he felt a sickening thud in his chest. Right on his sternum. He fell backwards partly from the impact, partly from surprise, with his hand over his heart.

"Sarge! Denny! Denny!" Daly was leaning over him then.

His eyes were wide open. He wasn't blinking. He didn't seem to be breathing.

"Sarge, you son of a bitch, get up!" Daly was on the verge of tears, shaking his friend by the shoulder.

Then like Lazarus, Sarge just sat up. He shook his head, then pulled open his shirt. No blood. He staggered to his feet.

Daly was still kneeling where he had been, the men were in the pit, and they were all dumbfounded, staring at him gape-mouthed, their faces stricken with a combination of horror and wonder.

"Oh my God." Daly whispered. "You're John Fucking Wayne. Did you guys see that? Did you fucking see Sarge get shot in the heart and live?"

Sarge held his dog tags away from his chest. The double thickness of metal had a bullet-shaped indention about 2mm deep. He looked up and said, "I am John Fucking Wayne."

That's a story my brother told me just last year while we were on a hike when I was home for Christmas break. Even he seemed shocked that I hadn't heard that one before. So, now my dad turns out to be not only this immensely selfless and competent sergeant, but now he is also John Fucking Wayne.

When he finally got out of that god-forsaken piece of the world, my father went right back to his life as if nothing much had changed. He went back to dating my mom, went back to working at Red River Army Depot. And the big fat roll of money he had earned as a soldier went to pay for his silver and chrome, black leather interior, Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. 1971. It was his first brand new car ever and he babied it. I remember how hot it was in the summer because of the black leather…and the seats would burn you when you first sat down, then how you would be stuck to the seat with sweat when it was time to get out. But that was our cool car. Dad would turn the radio up and we would all sing Elvis and Buddy Holly and Creedence Clearwater Revival. I remember how there were always peppermints in the console. How it smelled like a combination of my parents: Old Spice, Big Red, and Enjoli.

For twenty years that car was the baby of all the cars. Couldn't be parked just anywhere. Couldn't be driven long distances. Couldn't be taken to a regular mechanic, but only to a specialist for tune ups and minor repairs. When it came time for me to drive, I fully expected to drive the 1982 beater of a Blazer to school everyday, but I didn't care as long as I got to drive. So, the day after I got my license, I was on my way out the door, late as usual. I grabbed the Blazer keys, but Dad stopped me.

"Amy?"

"What Dad?" He has this really annoying way of taking forever to ask something.

"What would you say…" Big dramatic pause here, another annoying thing he likes to do.

"To what? I'm late! What?"

“What would you say if I let you drive the Oldsmobile?” He sort of looked like he had a smirk on his face. But my dad doesn’t smirk.

I looked out the door and in the driveway, it was already pulled out behind the Blazer. I looked back at him and he was definitely smirking.

“Okay. Cool.” I reached for the keys he held out to me, but he pulled them away.

“If it rains today, don’t gun it because it will fish tail on you,” He warned.

“Okay. I won’t gun it.”

“And don’t drag race it home, either.” He warned, looking more serious about this one.

“Okay, I won’t drag race it home,” I laughed.

“Okay…be careful.” And he let go of the keys.

I remember pulling open that heavy door, throwing my books in the back and sitting down for the first time. It still smelled like my parents. Now I was driving it. I was getting to drive the Oldsmobile. Wow. A true honor. I remember Dad watched and waved with a faraway look on his face. And I didn’t get it for the longest time. Until I realized. He didn’t let my brother drive that car. He doesn’t even like Mom to drive it, unless she wants to, which she doesn’t.

The only thing my Dad could ever give me from his other life—the who he was before he got broken by Vietnam—was a dream…perhaps the only dream that survived intact through the swamps and jungles of Cambodia, the rice paddies and hamlets around Tay Nihn. The only thing that clung to him as he ripped open the air with his M60 in the shadow of the Black Virgin Mountain was a picture of a car.

Twenty Cookies

Ramen noodles and Girl Scout cookies do not mix. Especially if you drink a beer after the noodles and before the cookies. Nolie learned this from experience. She naturally felt gross and guilty about eating half a box of cookies in one sitting while she was watching one of those cheerleading competitions on ESPN 2 (at 1:30 in the morning, mind you), and decided she needed to go for a run. At that very moment.

In the happiest voice she could muster, Nolie woke up her yellow lab, "Hey, Barbie? Wanna go? Wanna run?" The dog just blinked at her, dazed for a minute. Barbie stretched her legs and slowly walked to the door where she sat with her nose touching the doorknob.

When they were about four blocks away from the house, Nolie discovered that the unique chemistry of beer, noodles, and cookies should not be shaken. The reaction is violent.

It's not over, she thought, sinking to the curb to catch her breath and spit the sour taste of bile out of her mouth. Barbie sniffed in disgust and sat at the end of her leash, looking past Nolie down the street.

After twelve months of "Hi, my name is Nolie—I'm bulimic," she thought she had cast out all the demons of her addiction by their naming. She thought three years worth of confessions of gluttony would have filled her stomach with enough undigested Hail Marys to weigh her down, to make her feel full. As proof that she had mastered control of her life again, Nolie kept track of the number of grocery store aisles she could walk down without daydreaming about the juicy, sweet, crispy, or savory meals she could concoct and eat alone on the living room floor. She had exchanged drinking water for

bingeing and traded yoga for the hypnotic paralysis of lying on the couch captured by the wavering blue light of the television. She had replaced the ring on her finger with a tattoo of a butterfly on her hip, and built a CD library that any dee-jay would envy just so she could dance whenever she felt like it.

But there she was again, sitting in the gutter in the cool of dark, shins splattered with specks of Thin Mints, no closer to being in control of anything than when it all started. If Nolie called her sponsor, Marlene, the woman would say, “Nolie, think about which choice you made that caused you to break your promise to yourself.” But she didn’t want to think. All she wanted to do was take a shower and go to bed. She refused to consider why she had bought the cookies in the first place. She didn’t ask herself why she had bought a case of beer, or why she had stayed up so late watching that stupid cheerleading contest. She just walked home. While Barbie’s nails clicked on the sidewalk, Nolie stared at her speckled shins. The reflectors of her running shoes barely flashed in the orange light of the street lamps.

She called in sick to the bookstore the next day because she was just not willing to get up and do her hair and put on makeup and pretend to be a functioning adult. Nolie laid in bed pinching an inch worth of skin around her stomach and scolding herself. “See what cookies do to you, you idiot. What were you thinking? Really, honestly, what were you thinking when you went to the store on Thursday?”

Barbie stood at the edge of the bed with her head cocked to one side as if she were carefully forming the answers to Nolie’s questions.

“I’m not talking to you, sweet girl,” Nolie sighed, patting Barbie on the head. The dog jumped up on the bed with her, and curled into a ball in the crook of her knees.

“That’s a good idea,” she said, snuggling down into the covers to go back to sleep.

She woke up to the phone ringing. It was Marlene calling to check up on her—a daily ritual of the over zealous sponsor. Nolie didn’t feel like answering it, but she knew if she didn’t, Marlene would likely be knocking on her door within the half hour.

“Why aren’t you at work today, Hon?” Marlene asked. Nolie could imagine the woman flipping through a copy of Cosmo with her lips pressed together as if in an eternal effort to smooth her lipstick.

“I feel like crap.”

“Yes, Hon, by *why* do you feel like crap?” Marlene always approached counseling with this pattern of questioning—always wanting to know the “why” behind everything. She had failed as a psychology major, but now got her jollies by helping over-eaters, alcoholics, and the hopelessly unorganized. Her business card actually said, “Think Thin, Think Sober, Why not get your life in order?” She was assigned to Nolie at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting.

Nolie wrapped the telephone cord around her finger, still unwilling to ponder the reasons behind her actions.

“Did you binge last night?” Marlene asked.

“Sort of,” Nolie admitted, swinging the cord in big loops like a jump rope. Last night’s episode was tame compared to the infamous three Big Macs, whole Supreme pizza, and Sara Lee cheesecake incident.

“Girl Scout cookies?”

Nolie refused to confirm her annoyingly accurate guess, answering only with a sigh.

“You’re the fourth one today, Hon. Don’t take it so hard. Those buggers just lend themselves to eating a stack at a time. What else has got you so upset?”

“That’s all,” Nolie said. She could have sworn she heard Marlene flip another page of her magazine.

“Okay, I’m not going to push you. If you ask me, though, you really only need two things to get yourself back on track.” Her voice sing-song hinted at the blue bird on her own shoulder. “You need to find Jesus and a husband.”

Nolie laughed. Laughed and laughed. Advice from Marlene, the woman still wearing a poodle perm and neon tank tops that went out of style in 1987, was always this priceless. How does one take advice from a woman whose husband was a professional Elvis impersonator, The Sequined One (it said so on the back of his denim jacket)? From a woman who weighed 108 pounds soaking wet and had never struggled with her weight a day in her life. Nolie knew she could just sit on her and break each of her bones like so many pretzel sticks if she really needed to.

“You’re right Marlene,” she said. “It’s just that easy. Why didn’t I come up with that on my own?”

Marlene clucked her tongue. “Now, Nolie, I know you want to resist my advice because you don’t like me, but only by the grace of the good Lord Jesus will you escape the miry pit you’ve gotten yourself into. And a husband would provide some stability you desperately need in your life.”

“Look, Marlene,” Nolie said, opening the pantry door just to stare at what was there. “I went to Catholic school. I know all about Jesus. I talk to Him everyday and ask Him to lift this burden from me, but He says ‘No,’ so I keep on struggling. And if you think I need a husband, you don’t even begin to comprehend my real problem. I had a husband. He’s not here anymore. Do you want to know why? Because he thought my bulimia was funny. Because he made fun of me when I danced. Because he thought he owned me. Because he couldn’t protect me like he was supposed to.”

Marlene was silent on the other end of the line. Then she heard the quick shuffling of paper and a loud crashing rattle of the phone being dropped on a linoleum floor.

“Here. Call this number,” Marlene said. “You need to be in a battered women’s group.”

“No, Marlene, I don’t,” Nolie said.

“Here’s the number, just dial it whenever. It’s a hotline,” she said, calling out the numbers.

Nolie hung up the phone, then unplugged it from the wall. She hated when Marlene did that. Even though she was clueless about the reality of the situation, Marlene had gotten to her that day. Jesus and a husband? Jesus.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been three weeks since my last confession,” Nolie said, whispering inside the dark cubicle, nervously plucking at the scratchy burgundy seat cushion.

“Go ahead, child,” a deep voice said on the other side of the fuzzy screen.

What did she want to say*? I have committed the sin of gluttony. I have committed the sin of self-loathing. I have committed the sin of blaming God for my problems because He hasn't stepped up to bat for me yet, as far as I can tell. I have committed the sin of blasphemy. I have committed the sin of wanting unconditional love.* "I have committed the sin of adultery," she finally whispered.

"Magnolia? Is that you?" Father Prescott recognized her voice.

"Yes, Father."

The priest sighed heavily behind the screen. Last time Nolie came to confession, she revealed feelings of guilt about three pieces of cake she had purged after a co-worker's birthday party. Father Prescott had told her then not to come back until she was ready to confess her true sin—whatever was behind the bulimia.

"Your marriage was annulled, child. We no longer consider it adultery for you to have a relationship now." He sounded bored and unimpressed.

"This was a long time ago, Father. This was when I was married. Although…"

"Although, what, Magnolia?" He yawned.

"It might not have been adultery then, either," she said, letting her shoulders droop. Tears slid down her cheeks and she quickly wiped them away with the back of her hand.

"What are you trying to tell me, Nolie?"

What exactly was she ready to divulge? The words wouldn't come, but all the old memories began to enfold her in a clinging chill. She suddenly craved a piece of apple pie a la mode.

When she was married to Alan, he often went out drinking with his friends. He went too often, really. She had to use both hands to count the times he had lost his keys at a bar. Three times she found him passed out on the front lawn. Once she had stood next to him in a courtroom while he was charged with a DWI. Six months after the DWI, when he did not come home for dinner one night, she decided to track him down at the bar and watch him from a distance.

The place was a hazy, upscale billiard and cigar bar. When she walked into the darkened room, he was not difficult to pick out, loudly bullshitting with his friends and flirting with three other women. He was just flirting, but still flirting nonetheless.

Nolie couldn't remember ever feeling as angry as she did at that moment, realizing what a fool he was making of her, acting like she didn't even exist. It seemed like he didn't have a care in the world except for the boobs in front of his face at that instant. And that's when Nolie realized that Alan didn't have on his wedding ring. The floor of her intestines dropped to her knees, and a hot flush colored her cheeks

Well, well, Alan Mason. So, this is how you want to play the game? To get back at him, Nolie decided to take off her ring and flirt, too. Right in front of him and his friends, at the very bar in which he had spent the whole night—perhaps every night, as far as she knew—with his wedding ring in his pocket.

Honestly, though, Nolie had never been one to flirt. It just wasn't her style. Alan had been her first love, anyway. He had noticed her in Biology 101, and did all the pursuing right up to the proposal. She said yes because he always laughed at her sarcastic jokes and liked to snuggle in bed late on Sundays.

She sat at the bar and ordered a Manhattan. She was fiddling with the cherry stem when someone leaned close to her ear and said, “Your bra strap is showing.” Nolie looked at him quickly, expecting it to be Alan, but it wasn’t. The voice belonged to a very handsome man, a young thirtysomething wearing a navy cashmere sweater and expensive khakis. His fingers barely grazed her shoulder as he moved the strap underneath the edge of her shirt.

She moved it back to where it had been. “It’s supposed to show. Don’t you know it’s all the rage? Do you think I’d go through all the trouble of wearing such an unbearably itchy black lace bra so no one could see it?”

“Oh, I get it,” he said, with a sly wink. Nolie noticed he had very long eyelashes and a noticeably bright smile. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the peeking-bra-strap ploy. I’m a little rusty, I guess.” He sat down beside her, brushing his arm against hers. She noticed the coolness of his watch starkly contrasted with the heat of his skin.

“So, now I’m supposed to ask why you’re a little rusty?”

“Right,” he nodded.

“How does a snazzy, hip, happening, cashmere sweater wearing guy like you find himself rusty at the games women play in bars during happy hour?” Nolie batted her eyelashes and upped the syrup of her slight southern accent for the full effect. That was about the extent of her flirting canon. Everything after that was new territory. In the back of her mind, she kept expecting Alan to come up behind her, put his big paw of a hand on her shoulder, and break up the whole exciting conversation.

“Well, ma’am, I’ve been in cold hibernation for a NASA experiment for the past five years. They just thawed me out last week,” he responded, pulling out his own accent and puffing up his chest.

“Oh, I see,” she nodded, knowingly. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Alan getting up with a crowd of people. They were putting on their coats and taking last swigs from their beers. Her husband, broad shouldered and blond, was easily the most striking man in the whole bar. He stood a head taller than anyone else in the room and could have seen her easily over his friends if he had just looked her way. But he didn’t. He was smiling at a lanky brunette who was hanging on his arm. She turned back to Cashmere Sweater and said, “So, you’re just looking for someone to warm you up?”

“Fine whiskey and a fine woman ought to do the trick,” he smiled.

Nolie leaned close to him, pressing her breasts into his arm, “I’ll take you up on that.”

He leveled his gaze to her eyes, asking sternly, “Are you serious?”

She nodded.

“Let’s go.”

If she had judged correctly, by the time they stepped out the door, Alan and his friends would just be reaching their cars. And since she parked next to Alan’s truck, he’d have to see her car and know she was there. She imagined how livid he would be at the mere thought of her with another man. Nolie could just taste the victory like a drug rushing through her blood.

The cold hit her in the face as they stepped outside of the smoky bar. Nolie’s eyes adjusted to the darkness and she was paralyzed by what she saw. Alan was

gone. Her car was still there, next to a big hole in the parking lot where his truck had been. She felt like she was going to throw up.

"I'm over here," Cashmere Sweater said, pointing his key remote at a top of the line SUV: tinted windows, running boards, extra chrome on everything. She noticed he had a Realtor insignia on the door when he opened it for her.

"I—I don't know if I can do this," she finally admitted, backing up a step. Inside her mind, she knew the expression on her face had to be a frightened one.

"Aw, Honey. It's all right." He stepped closer to her, touched her cheek, then he kissed her. She registered that he tasted like cinnamon gum and Maker's Mark, and smelled like leather and smoke from the bar. His kiss was tender, at first, gently searching. Nolie knew she shouldn't have enjoyed a kiss from a man who was not her husband, but she did, mainly because he was indeed not her husband. She hadn't kissed many men before Alan, maybe four or five. But she knew this kiss had to stop. She didn't really want anything from this guy. She didn't even know his name, for Christ's sake.

When Nolie pulled back, Cashmere Sweater's reaction was an equal and opposite pushing toward. His kiss changed from gentle to plundering. She felt like he was trying to suck her insides out through her mouth while he crushed her body against the car. Nolie felt his arousal against her hip and panicked. She tried to hit him, but the blows didn't make contact. She tried to scream out, but he sucked the sound away. She tried to twist away from him, but he held on tighter. He was leaving bruises on her arms and she felt him pulling wads of hair out of her head when she tried to spin away. He bit her lip hard enough to draw blood.

He opened the door behind her, picked her up, and threw her in. As he shoved her, she scraped the backs of her legs, leaving two hot stripes of pain running from knee to ankle. As if he had planned to do it here all along, if not with her, then with someone else, there were no seats in the back. There were however, still seat belts sprouting from the walls at regular intervals. He pressed her face against one of the buckles, holding her there by her hair. He leaned down to her ear again and said, "If you cooperate, I won't hurt you. I'll let you go and we'll pretend like this never happened. If you fight me, I'll burn you." He flicked a silver lighter near her face, and held the flame close enough to singe her bangs. The air was filled with the odor of burnt hair.

Nolie remembered breathing his breath and feeling sickened by its fumes. As the cold metal buckle dug into her cheek, she wondered if Alan was home yet—if he had realized she wasn't there. Would be coming back to look for her. *No,* she told herself. *He won't.*

Cashmere Sweater tightened his grip on her hair and encircled her neck with his other hand. He pressed each finger into her flesh like a claw until she could feel her veins throbbing under the pressure and she had to gasp for air. "Okay," she whispered.

"That's a good girl," the man said, releasing her throat from his grasp. He began to fumble with her coat to get it off of her.

"Let me," she said. She slipped her arms out of the coat. He took off her shirt, then her skirt, and then her hose. She vaguely remembered wondering where her shoes were. When he touched her bra strap, she jumped.

“We made a deal, right?” he growled in a low voice. His face had contorted into an ugly mask, the corners of his mouth turned down sharply and his eyes narrowed into slits. He clutched both of her bra straps in fists, and pulled her to his chest so roughly, he whipped her head back.

“Right,” she said. She began to cry.

He pretended not to notice as he lowered himself over her.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” Nolie said.

“Nolie, you already said that. Now, what are you trying to tell me?”

“I committed adultery when I was married and I never confessed it,” she whispered.

Father Prescott sighed on the other side of the screen. “Magnolia Walker, you are right to confess actions for which you feel are sins. A repentant sinner is the only kind that will win the reward of going to live with our Father in heaven. You are aware of the gravity of your actions, and seeing as how the marriage was annulled, I will not go through the motions of the reparations you should make to resolve your relationship problems.” His voice sounded distant to her—as if he thought she was lying or making up a story. She told herself it didn’t matter if he believed her or not.

“Since you are still plagued by the sin, only meditation and prayer will most certainly help you come to terms with what happened. You must be tired of Hail Marys by now, so over the course of the next month, I want you to say the rosary once a day. And I want to see you at mass every Wednesday and Sunday. You are forgiven, my child.” He dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

Nolie left the sanctuary with a black scowl on her face. She went to McDonald's on the way home and got a regular, not Super-Sized, chicken nugget meal. When she got home, she methodically arranged the food on her plate so that the fries were not touching the chicken. She sat down with a bottle of ketchup in the living room floor and turned on the news. She squeezed a dab of ketchup on each bite of food she took. This was the best way to prevent that annoying problem of too much ketchup left, or not enough ketchup to go around.

Though the phone had been unplugged, the answering machine had not. Marlene had left five messages. Two were about battered women's syndrome. One was an apology. One was an "I'm worried, where are you?" call, and the last was a surefire trick to conquer sugar cravings—a tip she read straight from the pages of her Cosmo, no doubt.

When the food was cold on her plate, that was her own rule for pushing it away. She fed the scraps to Barbie, who gladly gulped them down and looked expectantly for more, wagging her tail. "That's all I've got Barbarellie." The dog sighed, then plopped down beside her. Barbie rested her head on Nolie's knee and they watched the news that way until a game show came on. "We can't stand that cheesy guy, can we?" Barbie wagged twice.

Nolie turned off the television to get ready for her nightly yoga session. While she was putting her plate in the sink, she turned to the open pantry and there it was: the box of cookies that had started this day of misery. At that moment, she decided she needed to go for a run.

As she put on her running shoes, Barbie got up from the couch and stretched, getting ready for the run, too. “You’re not going this time, girl. Go back and lay down, if you want.” The dog seemed confused, and stared at Nolie with her head cocked to the side.

On her way out the door, she grabbed the box of cookies and tucked them under her arm. Pacing herself at an easy jog, she rounded the first corner and opened the box. She threw one of the Thin Mints as hard as she could across the street. “No!” she shouted.

As she passed a big SUV parked on the street, Nolie flung another cookie at the driver’s side door like a throwing star. “No,” she yelled.

Down the neighborhood sidewalk, she ran, crumbling cookies in her hands, tossing them beneath the wheels of passing cars, over tall fences, into shrubs lining driveways.

A little girl rode up next to Nolie on her bike and asked, “Can I have one? If you’re just going to throw them away?” Her pigtails were blowing in the wind, and her light colored eyes searched Nolie’s face with tiny upcurved brows. She noticed that the girl pedaled with tanned bare feet, and had a blue bandage on her knee. Nolie saw own reflection in the girl’s eyes.

“No, you don’t need them,” she said, and she stomped the last cookie under her heel.

Lying Raven

The bombs fall in smoky reddish arcs over our heads and beyond into the hills east of the city. More than a few tumble down out of the sky and explode in earthquaking waves of metal and shattering stone much closer to us. By the sound of it, the airfield is taking the brunt. I wish our quarters weren't so close to the runways. I imagine that the red cross on the roof must look a fine bulls-eye to the *Luftwaffe* right about now.

There had been a small forest near our first medivac site, down closer to Salerno. We had managed an impromptu picnic about a week before we moved here. A small group of us nurses and some of the well-enough-to-walk wounded officers ate apples and cheese with a crusty loaf of sour-dough. The pines had whistled down the wind, swinging their branches over our heads as if keeping time to some song we couldn't quite make out. That seems like such a long time ago. Most of the forest is burned now. At least that's what we heard after we moved.

It had reminded me of the woods behind our house in Kentucky. Robin and I used to play there, pretending we were Indian princesses who could command the streams and the birds and the toads with our secret language: Cherokee words my mother had taught us. *Ama* means water, *unole* means air, *alasgida*, dance. We used to know the turns of every trail, where the tadpoles hatched in May mud-puddles, and where the boys went skinny-dipping south of Harper's Ridge. Life was easy and full of magic back then.

Here, though, in the land of mud and blood and broken bodies, those memories seem like the ghosts of some other lifetime. Here our daily instructions are to be

pleasant, to read letters if asked, to write them for those who can't use their hands, to offer soft words of encouragement. I think I have been in this medivac camp for a month already. Yes. One month and three days.

The shelling is getting closer again. Beyond the thunder of bombs and the blasts of breaking glass, silence is the loudest thing I can hear.

We set up the tents about three weeks ago. We didn't have space for everyone inside, so those who could wait, waited. I have become an expert at setting tent stakes now. The olive green of the tent walls have turned a chocolate brown with the recent rains, the splattering mud, and the day the wind kept blowing them down. We pretend the darker brown spots on the walls are merely the stains of darker earth and not the stains of blood.

We're always afraid that we'll be bombed like this by one side or the other, mistaken for the enemy if the lines should suddenly turn in our direction. We try not to complain, but we have made a grand joke of blaming the Germans for every little thing that goes wrong, for any backwards event we hear about. They intentionally bombed a British hospital ship not a week before this operation began, but they didn't get a single nurse and miraculously only the morgue was affected. "Killing the dead, that's a good strategy," we said to one another. We still try to keep our red cross banners flat, tied to ambulance roofs and the makeshift tents, or flapping behind the jeeps, always visible to the sky.

Sometimes I take the triage shift, riding in the front of an ambulance to meet the incoming wounded. I end up clutching my black musette bag to my chest, anxious to

get there, anxious to leave again. Listening to the awful agony of groaning men as we bump over the rutted drive is enough to make me cry. But I don't. I would never. Sometimes a young driver will flirt with me, either out of politeness or genuine interest, I can never tell. I try to smile at their boyish faces and shining eyes, praying all the while I won't have to look into them cold and unsparkling someday. Too many lids I've lowered already.

I have gotten very good at lying while I've been here. We lie to the men—the ones who will die soon or the ones who have lost a friend. We tell them they'll be fine in a jiffy and all they need to do is rest. We tell them that they are handsome and strong. We have learned not to make faces when we see their wounds or smell the rot of gangrene. We lie to the doctors when they tell us to cut back on morphine, saying yes sir, half doses sir. Then we double it for the ones who need it most and sneak whiskey to the others if we have it.

We lie to our mothers. I write in my letters that the food is okay and my underwear is still basically white despite the dirty water we have to use. I tell her the doctors are nice and that the soldiers are all brave boys. That I am fine. Sometimes, though, I call her *Aluli*, my word for Mommy, and ask her to pray to the Four Winds for my spirit to know the way home if I am ever killed over here. I send her envelopes of dirt from each of my stations so she will know where I am, so she can smell for herself the loams and clays and silts that I walk upon. She sows the soil into the garden and tells me that Sicily made her tomatoes sweeter.

I try not to lie to myself. Sometimes I do, though, because it's easier. I tell myself they are The Wounded and I am The Nurse, and I can fix them. But when it

came to him (his dog tags said his name was Jack Mallory), I could not believe he had survived with as much blood as he had lost, was still losing. When I pressed down on the seeping wound in his chest, the blood wouldn't stop. I pressed on it with all my weight, but the muscles slipped and the pulse still throbbed. The stream was constant, pooling on the stretcher beneath his head, dripping down my pants, soaking my socks inside my boots. He couldn't speak at first, but his mouth moved and his eyes rolled around, his whole body shaking with shock.

I kept saying, "Don't move, don't move, don't move."

Sadie came to help me after she heard my chanting. We got a couple of pressure bandages over the ragged wound, and finally the flow stopped.

"He won't make it," she said, and moved on to the next emergency.

I tell myself he's just another soldier—just another wounded man too delirious from pain and drugs to know what he was saying.

But then Jack Mallory spoke to me. He said, "You look like an Indian with those braids."

I said, "I'm a nurse, now hush."

"You might be both," he said again, then coughed, wincing with pain.

I stared at him and kept my eyes right on his and said, "I'm your nurse and you shouldn't be talking. You should be resting." I was giving him a double dose of morphine and some penicillin by then. I realized he was full of shrapnel, riddled with it from forehead to navel, but you could tell he was still handsome under all the crusted blood. His eyes were bright with fever—a glassy greenish-blue like the ocean off of

Florida I saw on a postcard once. I remember wishing I hadn't stared into them for so long. It was like staring into the sun—the shine stayed with you after you looked away.

"You're not a nurse," he whispered. The morphine was taking hold by then and the grimace of pain had left his mouth. He was watching my hands as I cleaned his wounds. "You're a bird, come to fly me away. Must be a raven with hair so black."

When he said that, I froze. My heart pounded hard and my breath caught in my throat. A chill ran over my skin raising goose bumps all the way down to my knees. My first reaction was to back away from him real fast. I remember I bumped into Sadie because she said, "Watch it, Birdy Jane." See, that's what's so strange: no one knows my real name here and I couldn't figure out how he knew it. He had said my name.

"Don't leave," he whispered loudly. "Don't leave me here. Please?" His glassy eyes were fixed on me, his hand held out, reaching for me.

My mother's voice was running through my head. "Don't turn away when the man calls your name unknown. " She had dreamed of him the night before I left for training camp. She told me, "He's the one who'll know your spirit on sight, Kolana, Little Raven."

When I took his hand in mine, a peace fell over his face. He fell asleep a minute later and I knew I had to act fast. He was scheduled for surgery in three hours, but I knew he wouldn't make it that long. Infection could set in. He was already weak with the loss of blood…but, I could not make my feet move away from his bed nor my hand let go of his. I thought about everything I had found in his pockets: a small metal cross, a cat's eye marble, a pack of cards, a letter to his family in Iowa. The letter was still

tucked in my belt to mail for him. I needed to copy it, though. I couldn't mail it with his blood splattered across the address.

My mother's voice came back to me, harsher and more insistent. She had lectured me sternly that morning, and I could see her in front of me again. She was leaning a hip against the kitchen counter shelling purple-hull peas and speaking with a deadly seriousness. "You must be brave, Kolana. You are going where your dreams have led you. Remember when you saw the raven flying over the ocean? Remember when it smothered the fires of white men with its wings? Remember when it healed the burned men's faces with its tears? That is you, Kolana. That is your job." I remember how her round face had been drawn up into a raised-eyebrow look of expectation. It meant I should be accustomed to these sorts of meetings with fate by now.

I ran as fast as I could sliding through the mud to the OR tent and found the tentative schedule. Mallory was listed for 15:45. Above his name was a man with an arm amputation, two with head wounds, another with shrapnel to both legs. On the nurses' list, I had already crossed off the amputation because he had bled to death within an hour of his arrival. I put Mallory's name in his place and was satisfied with the two-hour improvement. It was all I could do for the time.

We have a sort of agreement among the nurses that we can shift names like that if we think someone can make it under the line. We have to plead our cases if the OR asks questions, but usually they let us decide. Especially Sadie and me. She was certified before she signed up and I have already seen a year of action. We are both ready to leave Naples, though. Too much goddamned mud in my eyes is how she explains it. And I can't think of a better way to put it, either.

When the bombing lets up, I will move, get into my yesterday uniform in the dark, and go help with any new casualties. I hate the waiting, though. It makes my mind wander.

I still can't believe all those trees are gone now. Just flat out gone. Here one day, burned up and black the next. Like Daddy. My mother knew he was going to die in the mine that day. She told him, "John Coe, don't you set foot underground today. I can smell the rocks grinding—smells hot, like an iron." She had stood there with her hands braced against the sink behind her. Her blue shawl had slipped down to her elbows revealing the contrast of white nightgown against tan shoulders.

"Oh, pshaw, woman. I do what I got to do. They didn't go off making me foreman to have me stand around up top and smoke cigarettes to the nub like I was afraid to get my hands black. I'll be fine, Doll." He had hugged her with his hands full of coat and lunchbox and kissed her quick on the cheek. "How's about stew tonight? I've got a mean hankering for it, if you can scrounge it up."

"I mean it John Coe Michaels. Stay out of that hole," she warned him again, but he was out the door and gone by then.

He didn't look much like himself in his coffin. He looked like a wax dummy he and I saw once at a carnival. His lips were too red and his nose was all crooked. He seemed shrunken, too, like they put some bigger man's suit on him. Aluli said he looked that way because his spirit was gone and his body didn't have to hold as much as it did before. Daddy was the one who named me Birdy Jane because he didn't think

he could make Kolana sound as pretty in his mouth as Aluli did. I was twelve the year he died.

By the time I was sixteen, I had realized the only way to get out of Carter's Crossing was to get married to a military man or a preacher. Most of the men near us were already married or related to Daddy, so the prospects were slim. The ones that were decent enough to look at didn't want a thing to do with me, not if you paid them. I found out later from Robin that they thought Aluli might poison them or cast a spell that would make their peters fall off. After Daddy died, she took on more healing and midwife jobs to pay our bills. She became famous around our part of Kentucky for knowing the sex of the babies before they were born and how many there were going to be and if they might be breech or stillborn. The men thought she was a witch doctor and she just thought that was the funniest thing ever.

When we went to town for supplies or food or anything, she'd yell at the men who hung around the front of Grey's hardware store. "I see you, Henry Lightfoot. I see you looking at my Birdy Jane like the wolf dog that you are." She would squint one eye and point her pinky at him, pitching her voice about an octave higher than normal. "And you Douglas James—shame on you for staring at her like a mooning calf. I ought to tell your wife. I'd just as soon give you the *uwuyadv hagata* as anything. You better mind yourselves, you filthy pigs, because you can believe I'm watching you two." She would laugh to herself the whole way home, clucking her tongue and asking me, "Did you see their faces?"

As might be expected, I didn't have any dates in high school. Which was just as well since I didn't have any pretty dresses or nylons to wear. Just plain navy skirts that

almost reached the floor and white shirts I bleached and starched to pretend they were still new. I knew I could not stay in Carter's Crossing with Aluli forever, and so did she. We figured I could become a nurse and join the military myself. They had a military nurses' training school in Louisville and that's where Robin and me went after high school. We rode the bus there with our church hand-me-downs in small suitcases, occasionally peeking into our handbags to make sure our acceptance letters were still there.

Was that only two years ago? I guess that means Robin's been married for over a year already. Must've had the baby, too. She got married and pregnant within two months of meeting Digby Garrison, dropping out of the nurses' school without so much as a shrug. Digby was a lawyer's son from Lexington. He fell crazy-mad in love with Robin at first sight one day down at the Walgreen's lunch counter. I was her maid of honor in their little courthouse wedding three weeks later. I wore my pink sprigged calico and her navy pumps with a pillbox hat we found at a consignment shop. We had cake from the downtown bakery and I threw rice at them as they drove away. Sure is hard to believe it's been that long.

It's just as hard to believe that Jack Mallory is dead. But that's what they told me last night before I came to bed. After they picked 27 shards of metal out of his face, neck, stomach, and intestines, after I cleaned each and every sewn up hole with alcohol twice a day, after I wrote three letters for him, and read one from his mother, they told me he is dead. Sadie's mouth was turned down sharp at the corners, trying hard not to cry, when she told me. That means she's not joking just to be mean.

He was from Iowa, Jack Mallory was. His father raises horses and wheat, and his mother teaches school. He has a baby brother named Patrick, who wants to join the war, but he's only fourteen. Jack Mallory told me stories about jumping out of planes with nothing but a piece of cloth and some cords between him and falling to his death. He said he'd been over in England for months and months training to become a paratrooper before he got his first real jump.

"It's like flying, Kolana. You got your heart in your throat and your hands are all sweaty, but it's so, so quiet up there and you just float. But then you remember you've got to land and keep your wits about you, so you go back to sweating. And praying." He would laugh. He had a laugh that was warm and bright, a chortling-clucking you had to join in with, though sometimes he got carried away with a big belly laugh and wound up pulling out stitches. He made all the girls smile at least once a day, like it had been part of his original mission all along. Even Sadie was fond of him and his tousled blond head. She didn't get mad if I sat and talked with him after hours, as long as we kept the boisterousness to a minimum. We would talk softly about random things. I would stare into those oceany eyes while he would twist the ends of my braids around his fingers.

The last time I changed his bandages, I knew he was getting better and would be gone soon. He had caught my hand and held it flat to his chest. He had closed his eyes and sighed.

"Jack, let me finish," I said.

"Not yet," he whispered.

"I've got others to tend to, you know," I whispered back.

“Just stay here. Close your eyes. Let’s pretend we’re in the forest. Listen to the wind in the trees. Feel the warm sun on your face, smell the pine needles . . . now, give me a great big kiss like no one can see us,” he had said.

“Oh, Jack Mallory, you goose. Everyone can see us. This isn’t the place nor the time,” I said quietly.

“But we’re way off in the woods, remember?” He smiled. He had the greatest, biggest grin.

“Later,” I said, and gave him a wink.

I expect they’ll be setting up more tents, soon. From the sound of it, the bombs have moved to the north 10 miles or so. If there are tremors underfoot, I can’t feel them now. First, we’ll have to assess the damages and see how many bombing casualties there are. Then we’ll have to regroup the less serious and the more serious and the dead into different tents. That is after we set the tents up again, if we still have enough left. The dead will probably lie outside in pile, I bet. Hopefully covered. One thing I will never grow accustomed to is the sight of a row of dead bodies, all shrunken and hollow without their spirits. I do not want to see Jack Mallory’s face in the row. Sadie said I probably wouldn’t recognize him if I saw him, anyway, so just don’t go over there. Don’t go look for him, is what she said, squeezing into my hand one of his dog tags.

He was just another soldier, I say to myself. I even pretend I’m not lying.

Pretty Stones

For as long as I can remember, Grandfather has eaten his pecan chaw nearly constantly: upon rising, between meals, as dessert, whenever he listened to the farm report on the radio, when he was mad, when he was happy, on days when his social security check came in the mail, and on market days. Everyone in the family knows how to make it, because he always expects the chaw jar to be full all the time. For instance, he eats a handful or two in the morning while he reads the paper, then he puts on his overalls and his old straw hat and walks out the door shouting “more chaw in the jar.” This is what he says instead of goodbye.

If Nana was busy doing the dishes or laundry or something, either me or Carla, my little sister, would hurry up and make it. It’s real simple. You take a cup each of pecans, dried apricots, and coconut flakes. Half a cup of raisins. Put it all in a bowl and two tablespoons of water and one tablespoon vanilla extract. Mix it all around, then add a teaspoon of cinnamon and a teaspoon of chili powder. Mix it up again and put the whole bowl in the oven for about ten minutes at 300 degrees. When you take it out, let it cool, then put it in the chaw jar that sits next to Grandfather’s chair in the den.

So, when he came in for dinner, after he ate what Nana made for us, he would go and sit in front of the radio again to listen to the midday news. He would hold the jar in his lap and just eat and eat until it was time to go back out and work on something, saying “more chaw in the jar.” Nana always said he was spoiled, and if she was the only one there, she wouldn’t make it any more. I made it all the time, because Grandfather gave me a dime whenever I did. When Carla got big enough to do it herself, we had to share the chore so we wouldn’t fight over who had the most dimes.

Used to, in the fall, when the pecans got ripe and the wind began to blow cold at night, Grandfather would ask us to go pick up pecans whenever I got home from school. I usually hated picking pecans. It took forever and dirt would get stuck in the creases of your hands. And it was boring. Sometimes I would hide from Grandfather in the shed or down by the creek, or sometimes high in the branches of the century oak, just so I wouldn't have to go. But if Carla really wanted to go, I would go with her.

The problem with picking up pecans after they've been blown down is that they do this thing where they burrow themselves down into the grass until they're nearly invisible, dust-colored lumps, hiding, hoping not to get found before they can sprout themselves solid into the earth. If we could have seen with our feet, we would have found a million pecans, I bet. But aside from growing toe-eyes, we figured out it was best to wear sandals or Keds with no socks, even though it was chilly sometimes. What we'd do is start at the base of the tree, then slide our feet from side to side, sweeping the grass roughly with the soles of our shoes. The feel of a pecan under the grass is not much different than a rock until you do it for a while. You can begin to tell, though, as you're sweep-step-stepping along if you've got a good one or not. A ripe pecan will not crack unless you stomp on it, but a hollow, withered pecan will often crunch, even under the lightest sweeping step.

The last time we went, Carla was little—probably five or something. Seems like everyday that fall, she'd be waiting for me at the end of the driveway when I got off the bus. I'd put on some pants and a tee shirt, and we'd get our buckets out of the shed. Across the driveway and down behind the barn, we followed a little rocky trail to the

creek. It was one of those days where it was all blue sky sunshine and warm and it smelled like dry grass and fallen leaves. The cicadas were whining on and off and the sound made me feel so good and homey that shivers went up my back. We were picking up stones along the way to the creek and putting them in our buckets.

"Maryanne, what do you think of this one?" Carla asked, holding up a lumpy red jasper to the sky.

"Two people fighting," I said, taking it from her. "See, two heads and two fists and some elbows or knees."

She took it back and turned it over. "I thought it looked like Patty Coburn's big-headed dog. But I can see people fighting, too," she said, even though she probably couldn't.

Carla always looked for interesting shapes, but I looked for pretty colors, or sparkles, or slick or smooth textures. Nana gave me a book that said what kinds the different stones were. Mostly there was just quartz and iron oxide around here, but sometimes there was other stuff. Over by the railroad tracks, you could find all kinds of different stones…pink granite, yellow shale, jaspers, slate, limestone. But if I found a really neat shaped rock, I'd still keep it, or give it to Carla. I gave her rocks shaped like a bowtie, an ice cream cone, and the state of Ohio. I kept the one that sort of looked like an arrowhead, but Grandfather said it wasn't a real one. I remember Carla said "it is, too" when he walked away, and that had made me feel better, even though I knew he was right.

Grandfather had made a really good stepping stone bridge across the creek that you didn't get your feet wet on, so we tip-toed the stones and walked through the

pasture to the far side by the railroad tracks. Along the far fence grew about eight pecan trees that Grandfather and Nana had planted when they first got married and moved to Nacogdoches.

When we got to pecan picking, Carla started playing Pecan Bingo. It was this game she made up. You're supposed to yell "Bingo" when you get a good pecan. That way you can tell who's beating who. Whoever had the most good pecans before dark won. If you won, Grandfather would give you a quarter. So, off Carla goes, sweep-stepping around her tree, shouting "Bingo" like every third step. I didn't feel like playing. I just wanted to listen to the cicadas and think about things.

That day, I remember, I was wondering what it would have been like if our parents hadn't died and we didn't have to live with Grandfather and Nana. I loved them…but I just thought maybe there would be more things we could have done. Maybe Mama and Daddy and Carla and me would have gone to the Grand Canyon, or to watch a real baseball game in Dallas, or to the State Fair. Maybe we would have gone to visit Aunt Jo and Uncle Dan in Galveston again. Maybe Daddy would have built me a go-cart or taught me to ride a horse. Mama would have taken me to a real beauty parlor to get my hair cut, not cut it herself on the patio.

"Ha ha! I'm beating you so-o-o ba-ad," Carla sang at me from the base of her tree. I watched her throw five pecans in her bucket in one stoop, her dark hair floating around her head like the wings of baby birds. I wondered if mine looked that way to other people.

The train came by all of a sudden, which surprised me, because I hadn't heard the horn blow. I watched it go by, still sweeping and stepping, picking up a pecan here

and there when I felt one under my shoe. I liked all the crazy paintings on the cars—graffiti from city kids writing their names in five foot letters. I wondered what my name would look like that big. Too long. Right when the caboose went by, I felt a sting in my leg, behind my knee. Then another one by my ankle. I looked down and saw them. Rattle snakes. Three of them.

*

After that, I would wake Carla up at night to go for walks like we did before Nana got too scared to let us wander out of her sight. The railroad tracks weren't that far from the house and you could always find the prettiest stones by moonlight. They spoke to me, and I could just see them, even from ten steps away. If the moon was bright enough, you didn't even need to carry a flashlight. We walked on the shining rails just talking about different things, slipping stones into our pockets every now and then. And when Carla would get too tired, we'd sit on the cross-ties, still warm from the sun, and she'd fall asleep leaning on my shoulder. When she felt like talking, though, we'd walk and talk all night.

I overheard Nana and Grandfather fighting one morning after Bob Mays, our neighbor, brought me and Carla home one night after we fell asleep next to the tracks.

"Douglas Garland, this is your fault," Nana hissed, not wanting to wake up Carla, who was still asleep after our late night out. I knew Nana was really mad since she used Grandfather's real name.

"I don't know what you're talking about, woman," he said. His thin hair was all messed up from raking his fingers through it all night. I could see the silver of his whiskers shining when he turned his face toward the window. A train whistle blew.

“You heard what she said—that she was looking for pretty stones with Maryanne,” Nana said, her voice breaking when she said my name.

“What’s that got to do with me?” Grandfather said, his shoulders hanging oddly, rounded down, like a man much older than 62.

“Are you blind?!” Nana began to cry. “Who made her look for things on the ground with Maryanne?”

“I never told them to go to the railroad tracks,” he said, snuffling into his shirt sleeve.

“I can’t believe you just said that.” The bedsprings squeaked when she stood up. I heard Grandfather crying after that, real quiet, but later, you couldn’t even tell. His eyes weren’t even red.

*

The day Nana left, Grandfather had been listening to the news when the pecan chaw ran out.

“Woman! I need more chaw,” he had shouted from the den.

Nana was doing the dishes and didn’t hear him over the water. Carla got up from her lunch to make him some. When Nana saw her in the pantry, she said, “Sit yourself down, Miss Carla, and finish your lunch before it gets cold as a stone.”

“But Grandfather wants more chaw,” she said.

“I said sit down,” Nana said, still washing the dishes, but pointing with her chin toward the table.

Carla did as she was told, but I could see her soup and grilled cheese were already cold—the grease from the soup sat in little globs on the edge of the bowl. I

imagined it stuck to the roof of her mouth when she tried to eat it. She didn't eat anything, not really, just nibbled, and looked at me with the knowing we shared. Grandfather was going to get mad.

"Woman! I said I'm out of chaw!" Grandfather shouted even louder the second time. Although we couldn't see him from where we sat, we knew he was sitting in his recliner with his boots off and his legs propped up.

Nana did nothing, but I knew she had heard him the second time. I could tell she was mad from the set of her shoulders and how much her short, dark hair shook back and forth when she scrubbed a pot with the Brillo pad. And she wasn't just a little bit mad. This is normally when Carla and me would run and hide, just in case we were the ones who had made her hair-shaking mad.

Then I heard the squeaky springing sound of the closing recliner come from the den, followed by the clicking sound of its empty rocking. Grandfather appeared in the kitchen doorway and just stood there, staring at the back of Nana's head. He had a mean look on his face, like someone just made him eat something stinky. Like dog poop or turnip greens.

"You deaf?" He yelled. Nana flinched. Carla spit out a piece of unchewed grilled cheese and slowly slid off her chair and under the table.

"If you want your God-blessed chaw, you can take yourself over to that pantry and make it for your own damn self," Nana said, still not turning around to look at him. It was like her feet were tree roots planted solid to the floor, her toes white-gripping the edges of her house-shoes. She would not be moved involuntarily.

“What did you dare say to me, woman?” Grandfather said, deadly soft and quiet-like. He rocked back on his sock-footed heels once, then took a step closer to her.

“What? You deaf?!” She shouted. Our grandmother, even when she was hair-shaking mad, almost never yelled. I was suddenly scared and felt like I needed to pee really bad.

She finally turned toward him, slow, like a hand on a clock. When she finally faced him, she yelled at Grandfather again, saying the words one at a time: “Make It Your Own Damn Self.” A dishtowel fell off the counter behind her. Then, without shouting, she said, “I never once agreed to wait on you hand and foot, Douglas Garland—not while you have your health, anyway. And I’ll not have you pushing around another set of children with little bribes just so you can be lazy. If you want pecan chaw, get your worthless hind end in that pantry and fix it yourself.”

“You can just get out of my house if you think you’re going to talk to me like that,” Grandfather said.

Suddenly, I could feel Nana getting mad in a different kind of way now. It was like that time I knew there was a cat hiding in the shed before it jumped out and scared me, like I could hear it gathering itself up on its haunches to leap forward when I opened the door. I put my hands over my ears and joined Carla under the table.

“You can just get out of *my* house if you expect me to be your slave,” Nana said. I heard her slam something down on the countertop, like a skillet or a rolling pin—something heavy.

Abruptly, she turned around and picked the towel up off the floor, so I thought she was going to ignore him, but then she turned back. She walked past us, brushing her skirt

along the tablecloth close enough to grab if we had just been fast enough. She passed Grandfather, but he didn't move or even turn to watch her go. The slap of her house-shoes went down the hallway and straight to the front door.

"No! No, Nana," Carla cried after her, scooting out from under the table as quick as she could. I felt all hollow in my chest and my mouth tasted like iron. I followed them both out the door and ran after them. She was already halfway down the driveway when Carla caught up to her. She reached for Nana's hand, like she was going with her, but Nana stopped.

"Carla, it's okay. Go back inside, now," she said.

"No, I want to go with you!" she cried, grasping two handfuls of skirt, like this would be enough to make Nana take her along. Carla buried her head in Nana's apron and held so tight that her little arms began to shake.

"Don't be silly, Carla Jane. I'm not going to leave forever. I'm just taking a walk. I'll be home before you know it," she said, deftly unwinding Carla's fingers from her clothes. Nana leaned down, gave her a hard hug, then turned her around and pushed her toward the house.

I just stood there, listening to Carla whimper, tears and snot running down her face, watching Nana go. The hot sun of midday turned her figure into a wavy mirage by the time she got to the mailbox. Carla dragged her feet all the way back to the front porch and collapsed on the top step, crying herself sick.

"They always leave me," she whispered into her folded arms. I sat down beside her and rubbed her back until she fell asleep.

*

After Nana came home, we stayed outside, playing in the front yard, throwing milkweed silk in the air and pretending it was really a bunch of fairies we were setting free. Grandfather called Carla for her bath through the open window of the den. After five minutes of being ignored, Grandfather opened the front door to yell at her directly. “Carla, come inside, now, girl,” he said, motioning for her to go inside the house.

“No,” she said, looking away from him and straight at me.

“Come on, now,” he said, “Nana’s got your bath already running.”

“No,” she said, folding her arms over her chest. A flicker of a grin passed over her face.

“You want me to get my belt?” Grandfather’s voice had turned angry. The screen door did its slow, squeaky slam shut behind him. The crickets in the yard went quiet for a moment.

“Go ahead and get it. You can’t catch me if I run away,” she said, looking at him over her shoulder.

“Carla, don’t be a brat,” I said, ashamed she was being so mean to Grandfather.

“I don’t care what he says,” she said to me. The crickets started again.

Nana appeared on the porch behind Grandfather. “Carla Jane, come on and take your bath.”

“Okay, Nana,” Carla said, immediately turning and running toward the house. She tried to pass Grandfather like nothing had happened, but he grabbed her by the arm and swung her around to face him. Carla winced, like he was hurting her.

“If you ever sass me like that again, girl, you will find yourself in a world of trouble,” he growled, right in her face. The cap on his head was pushed way back and I could see his brow furrowed into a hunch of white bristly hair and his mouth was drawn up tight, exaggerating the fact that he didn’t have his dentures in.

Carla’s face was set into a seething stare, like she was daring him to hit her. But he didn’t. He just shook her once and pushed her toward the door. After she slammed the door shut behind her, Grandfather slowly sat down on the top step, taking off his hat and dropping his head into his hands. I sat down next to him, feeling sorry for him. I didn’t want to feel sorry for him, but I couldn’t help it. I touched his elbow, but he didn’t move.

I woke up next to Carla that night, in the bed we shared when we were little.

“Did you have a bad dream?” she asked.

“Snakes,” I said. “Tight skin.” She knew what I meant and curled up next to me, pressing her head into my back like a little dog or something. To console and be consoled.

“Want to walk the rails?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

That night we walked a long way not talking, just listening to the wind ruffle the trees. Clouds gathered and hid the moon and we wished we had brought a flashlight. Since we couldn’t see our way back, we sat on the tracks and waited for the clouds to break.

“Sometimes I get scared, Maryanne,” Carla said. Her voice sounded especially small. “Like I’m made of air and my body will float away any day now. Like there’s nothing to hold me together, except maybe eating Nana’s cooking until I’m really full.”

“Don’t be silly, Carla,” I said, pretending to laugh a little, but I knew how she felt. No food or comfortable place or tight clothes could make me feel held together. I carried stones like they might help weigh me down. As if by my fingers clutching them, I might remember what it was like to be solid.

“I can’t help it,” she said. She scooted closer to me and leaned her head up against my shoulder.

“I know.”

“Carla, wake up,” I said. It was beginning to rain and I thought I heard a train whistle in the distance.

“What?” she said, still asleep, her right arm clutching the rail like a pillow under her head.

“It’s raining. Let’s go back,” I said, nudging her in the back with my Keds.

“I’m too tired. And cold. I’ll just stay here,” she yawned, oblivious to the rain and the train I knew was coming.

“I’ll piggy-back you,” I said.

“Fine,” she said, stumbling up and clambering on to my back. I caught her hands in mine and then hitched up her legs on my hips. She was so light, it was like carrying a backpack to school. “I hope you don’t get sick from this. I should have made you bring a flashlight.”

“I don’t care,” Carla said.

“Yes, you do, Twerp. No one wants to get sick,” I said.

“I do. I hope I die,” she said, right into my ear. I felt her hands grab tight around my neck.

“No you don’t, Carla. You think you want to, but you don’t,” I told her, stopping to stand still so she would hear me. But then the clouds drowned me out, sending rain in a sudden burst, digging into our skin like fork tines. The wind rose up and blew wet ribbons of hair into our eyes and mouths. Carla began to shake and clutched at me tighter.

“It’s okay. We’re not really that far,” I shouted. But really, I was lost. I looked through the trees and brush for a light, hoping to see a house or barn I might recognize, but I didn’t.

“Maryanne, just let me die, please. Let a train run over me. Let me freeze.”

“No, and that’s final.” I began to trudge back toward the way we came, thinking the water tower would be on my right soon, and after that was the Mays’ place, and after that would be our pasture with the pecan trees.

“It’s not fair,” she said, beginning to cry. I could feel her shallow whimpering grow into full-fledged sobbing, rolling through her chest and echoing into mine.

The train whistle blew ahead of me and I could see its light coming around the bend. I stepped off the tracks and down the embankment to the edge of the trees, thinking no one would see us there. But as the train passed, the horn must have blown something close to twenty times. The man on the caboose was standing on the back platform with a flashlight and shined it on us for what seemed like forever. I just kept

going, minding my own business, just wanting to get Carla out of the rain still pelting us. Soon we heard screeching all down the rail lines. Brakes.

"Little girl," a man shouted from behind us. I thought maybe I should just keep walking, but decided to go ahead and just put Carla down and we would talk to the man. Maybe we could get a ride home. We stood there, shading our eyes from his flashlight as he approached. Soon we could see it was a fat man in a yellow slicker coming toward us, his hand shaking, making the light look jumpy. His double chin was splotchy red and white, like maybe he had a rash. He stopped about ten steps away from us, just staring until he finally asked, "Are you Carla Garland?"

Carla answered, "Yes. I'm just out here walking." I knew she was giving an excuse because she thought she was in trouble.

He shined the light into the trees like he thought someone was hiding in there. "Was someone else with you?"

"My sister," Carla said. I gave her the shut-up look, but she ignored me.

"Where is she now? Hiding in the bushes?" He waved the flashlight around again.

"Gone," she said.

A new look came over his face, like he suddenly realized he was dealing with one of "those" kind of kids. "Those" kind of kids being liars or not quite right in the head. I guess she qualified for both most of the time.

"Well, Carla, your grandparents are worried sick about you. Called the police and everything. The police stopped us in town and said you like to go for sleepwalks on the tracks. Is that true?"

“I’m not sleep-walking, Sir,” she said. A big shiver made her teeth chatter.

“Why don’t we take you back to your grandparents?” he said, holding out a hand to her.

“Okay,” she said, walking toward him. Then she stopped short. “Can my sister come with me?”

“Sure, she can, honey,” he nodded, his mouth pulling into a slight frown.

“Come on,” she said to me with a sigh. She continued on and I followed. The man tried to hold her hand, but she said, “no, thank you” and held my hand instead. It made me nervous to get on the train. Unfamiliar places made me feel even less held together than usual. The fat man wrapped Carla in a man’s coat so all you could see were her head and her feet. The fat man kept asking Carla questions like what her favorite color was (green) or where did she go to school (she didn’t) or did she have a pet dog (no, but she wanted one). The whole ride in the caboose, going backwards down the tracks, made me feel like we were time-traveling criminals, caught and forced to go back and face what we had done.

As I watched out the window for the water tower, then the silo on the Mays’ place, I realized we were passing our back pasture. The pecan trees. And there I was again. It was one of those days where it was all blue sky sunshine and warm and it smelled like dry grass and fallen leaves. The cicadas were whining on and off. The sound made me feel so good and homey that shivers went up my back. But this was like a dream. I could see the trees, the train caboose going by, Carla shouting “Bingo,” and myself just realizing I had shuffled into a nest of rattlesnakes.

I watched as Carla set down her bucket and skipped toward the other me shouting, “Slowpoke, slowpoke, I’m going to beat you so bad.” I was facing away from myself, but then I turned, making Carla stop dead in her tracks. My face was ashen, my eyes were bugged out, and my mouth was frozen in a wide-panicked soundless scream. I’d never seen anyone else ever make that face before, but it was easy to see I was terrified, injured, and afraid I was going to die.

“What?” Carla asked. She clutched her hands up tight to her stomach like she always does when she is afraid. “What’s wrong with you? Maryanne? You’re scaring me!” Her voice became shrill and bordered on screaming.

I watched myself reach out a violently shaking hand, and point to a place on the ground. My eyes automatically sought them out, coiled, leaf-colored, tails rattling. That buzzing sound...like bees trapped in a sack, made me want to climb a tree to get my feet off the ground. Carla crept closer to see.

“Stop there,” I heard myself command.

“What do I do?” Carla asked, frozen like she was afraid to move herself in any direction.

“Go get Nana or Grandfather and tell them to come get me,” I said. I couldn’t see my face anymore, but I remembered the exact moment. I remember hearing her footsteps crunch away through the tall grass, off to my right. I turned my head to watch her go and spotted another snake. I knew then I was going to die.

But this time, as I watched the defeat and the poison change my posture from rigid fear to limp hopelessness, I could not witness what happened to me next. I went with Carla. The grass slapped at our legs like tiny whips and the stepping stones in the

creek seemed wobbly and slippery. Up the rock path to the house, Carla was breathing too hard, and she held her hand to her chest like it hurt. Around the barn and past the shed, she tripped up the stairs and fell into the kitchen, landing on her side next to the stove.

"Watch yourself, child," Nana scolded, grabbing at a boiling pot and moving it to a back burner. "What's the matter with you?"

"Maryanne" was all she could say for about a minute. Nana took one look at Carla and knew she wasn't playing. She yanked off her apron and hurried to get some shoes. Carla followed her into the bedroom, desperately trying to say more. I watched from the doorway.

Shoes on, Nana turned to Carla and asked "What happened?"

"S-s-snakes." She finally managed to sputter out.

"Oh my good Lord, where?" she said, squatting down to eye-level with Carla.

"Pecan trees."

Nana took off without any further explanation for the shed. She came out with a hoe, but ran back toward us, shouting, "Ring the dinner bell. When Grandfather comes, tell him where we are." Then she was off again down the trail toward me.

Carla collapsed all sprawled out on the porch and cried, rocking back and forth, and saying "no" over and over again. It was enough to break my heart.

"The dinner bell, Carla," I whispered in her ear. I couldn't tell if she heard me, but she turned herself over, crawled a few feet along the porch, then got to her feet, sobs ripping out of her throat. Around the front of the house was the bell. We only used it when Grandfather had a big crew in to help brand and dehorn the calves and young

cows. Carla could barely reach the pull rope, but if she stood on her tip-toes, she could get a hand on the very end. First time she pulled, the rope slipped loose. Second time, though, she jumped and held, and let her whole weight pull the bell down. Then she jumped again and again, until the bell pealed loudly across the fields, the creek, the road, the railroad tracks. She kept it up for five minutes, her face twisted into a grimace of concentration, until the rope slipped again and she fell on her back. Exhausted, she stayed there a minute, trying to catch her breath.

"Snakes!" she shouted, jumping up and sprinting back to the porch. She climbed in the porch swing and balled herself up as small as she could make herself. I sat down next to her and gently swung the swing, hoping it would soothe her. In another minute or two, Grandfather's truck appeared at the end of the driveway. The tires ground to a halt in front of us and Grandfather shouted from the open window.

"Who rang that bell?" He sounded accusatory, like whoever rang it was going to get in trouble.

Carla sat up and began to cry again. "I did. Maryanne got bit by snakes."

"What did you say? Stop that yammery crying, girl," he said, getting out of the truck, still looking annoyed.

She stood up and yelled, "I SAID MARYANNE GOT BIT BY SNAKES!" Her fists were balled up tightly, her head thrown back, and her eyes squinted shut.

It took him a minute to process what she said. "Where?" He looked around, as if I were in the house or nearby somewhere.

"Down by the pecan trees. Nana already left with a hoe," Carla said, pointing toward the trail to the creek.

He turned and grabbed his gun out of the truck cab and hobbled as fast as he could go toward the creek. Arthritis in his hip and knees made him walk slow in the first place; running wasn't much faster and you could tell to look at him that he was already in pain.

Carla slumped back into the swing and cried until there were no more tears left to run down her face. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It wasn't your fault," I said. "These things happen."

*

At the Stallings Road crossing, flashing lights were everywhere and the train slowed to a stop. "Here you go," the man said to Carla, taking off the coat and ushering her toward the door. A sheriff's deputy with a cowboy hat and a moustache reached up and grabbed Carla under the armpits and lifted her down to the ground.

Out of the blur of flashing lights, Nana rushed toward Carla, her arms outstretched to hug her. She was crying and had her robe on over her nightgown. Her rainbonnet was dripping water into Carla's eyes, which she blinked away without complaint. Grandfather was behind Nana, tears or rain shining on his face in the police lights.

"Carla, don't say you were with me. Just say you were going for a walk, okay?" I whispered in her ear while Nana was still hugging her.

"What did you say, honey?" Nana asked.

"Nothing, Nana. I love you." Carla squealed with happiness when Nana hugged her tighter and said "I love you, too."

“Hi there, girl,” Grandfather said, when Nana pulled back to look at Carla. “You scared us again, there, young un’.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, bowing her head and looking at her hands.

“These midnight walks of yours are like to give me a heart attack, girl,” he said, chuffing her under the chin. I could see a little smile on his face. He even had his teeth in.

“I didn’t mean to,” she said, shrugging.

The ride home was short and Nana made Carla take a bath. When she was in clean pajamas again, we went back to bed.

She turned to me and smiled. “We really fooled ‘em, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. But I guess we shouldn’t go for walks anymore,” I said.

“You’ll still come and see me, though, right?” she asked, her voice sounding frightened.

“Always,” I said. She snuggled close to me and fell asleep within minutes. I listened to her breathing and watched the shadows shift around the room as the clouds passed and the moon set and the sun rose again in the morning.

Mister Vicky

So, my cross to bear in this life is the fact that I am a lesbian trapped in a gay man's body. That's no cross at all, really. Oh, yes, I tried to be a gay man, really I did, but honey, men are so…fickle and no more reliable than panty-hose from the dollar store. Especially the gay ones. They're all huff and puff, stroke and poke, eggs and bacon in the morning, then they don't call for ten days. And when they do, they're hopped up on ecstasy or coked out of their minds or one too many sloe gin fizzes past their thresh-hold, saying "Baby this" and "Mister Vicky that" and wanting to make a booty call while their wives have gone to spend the night with a sick friend. The last time Gary Allen called me begging for some loving while Trista Lynn was at her mama's, I flat out told him that Trista Lynn was probably down at the lake with Mark Fall and the gang from Johnny's in a fifteen way orgy because his wee willie winky was just that…wee. Ever since then, no men for me, honey.

I like to hang with the girls better anyway. They're so much more fun and sweet, and even when they're bitches, they bring the drama, and everyone knows how I live for the drama. They're all curvy and good smelling and sexy…what I wouldn't give for a real set of soft, sweet boobies to lay my head against at night. But, see, the girls want the manly men or the other girls, and so I become everyone's sister/brother. And I don't mind that. Not really. My home is always full of women who love me, my dance studio is full of precious little girls who bring Uncle Vicky flowers and home made coffee mugs and pictures they drew just for me, and at night, I tango with Jenny and Miss Dangergirl and we show the folks who come down for lessons what a real tango should look like. Miss Dangergirl is the one who loves me best anyway, never mind that she's a itty bitty

poodle dog. Yes she is. She's my baby girl. And what more could a sister/brother ask for, really? It's heaven. I have no complaints.

Well, you know, Gainesville's not the most progressive place in the world. Sometimes the Daddies get upset when they find out they have been sending their little girls to a man who calls himself Mister Vicky for ballet and tap lessons. Gawd, last year I had to call the cops on Dick Delmonico before he started swinging those big Italian hams for fists at me in front of the girls. I mean, what sort of genius does it take to realize after three years of sending your child to dance lessons, attending one recital per year, and hearing that sweet Angela talk about Mister Vicky at home (and I know she did because her mother told me so) that Angela's dance teacher is an excessively effeminate man? Hello? Unfortunately, when the Daddies realize what I am, it usually means the girls are sent to that bimbo hack Chandra Faye Darling for something she calls "cheer jazz" classes (makes me want to gag)…or they just stop dancing altogether. It's really just the saddest thing to watch children pay the price for their parents' fears. If you ask me, personally, I think they're just insecure. I mean all the bashers are.

Avery Johnson was the worst. He was such a homophobe, it wouldn't surprise me a bit if he didn't secretly want to get it in the back-chute from time to time. Either that or Father Gordon had a little sausage party with Avery back when he was an altar boy. That's where old wee willy Gary got the notion to hump the buns.

Anyway, Avery Johnson's temper was just out of control all the time. He's just an angry person in general, you know? I remember that time when he knocked himself out head-butting an ATM because it ate his card. He's just a big fucking redneck asshole,

and though he didn't have one in his truck cab, I bet he coveted all the other rebel flags driving around town. Or especially the stars-and-bars and gun rack combo.

So, anyway, I don't know what had stuck in his craw that night. I was just minding my own business, dancing with Jenny and Sharon down at The Catcall, a tiny bit into the sloe gin myself, when next thing I know, here comes this big fist wheeling at me in the middle of my "Y" for "YMCA." Avery winds up having a Hulk episode, sitting on my stomach and punching me left, right, left, right. I think he was yelling something like "mother fucking faggot," but I just remember spittle kept hitting me in the eyes. So gross. It wasn't long before Jenny had jumped on his back, pulling his mullet by the long part in back, and Sharon had taken off her sandals and was hitting him in the face with them. The next thing I remember was waking up at County Regional with a dislocated jaw, fractured eye socket, three broken ribs, a broken collarbone, a broken femur, a really fucking bad headache, and like six hundred tubes sticking out everywhere. That was the closest thing to hell I think I've been in several lifetimes.

I didn't press charges against him even though everyone thought I should. Rebecca Taylor even offered to provide my legal counsel free of charge. She wanted to put him up for attempted murder.

I told her, "Rebecca, honey, that's probably the nicest thing anyone has ever offered to give me, but I can't let you do that."

She was one of those really fiery types, you know, all souped up with rage from a pre-mature divorce—big hair, spike heels, long red fingernails—what a man-eater. She was like, "But Vic, you shouldn't have to put up with this shit. You weren't doing

anything. This qualifies as a hate crime, you know." I remember how crazy hot she looked right then, nostrils flaring and hair all wild.

So, I was like, "You're precious, Rebecca, but sweetheart, this shit's been happening all my life. Some people just can't handle what I got going on and they have to be haters."

Sharon had been by my bedside, too, and when I said that, she started up crying, all like "How can you joke at a time like this?" Her big blue eyes were red and just puffed up all to hell and she really did break my heart that day. I found out from one of the nurses that she hadn't left my side once in three days—threatened them all with a sandal whipping when they told her to go home. She was still wearing her little pink hoochie dancing get-up, mascara smeared all over her face and my blood on her shirt. That's probably the first time I realized how much she loved me. Cause if that ain't love, I don't know what is. Right, Miss Dangergirl? Sharon loves us, yes she does.

So, I finally had to spell it out to both of them. "If you press charges, what will happen is not that Avery Johnson's life will be put under scrutiny—mine will. They'll drag out every tomcat that even thought about sniffing around my ass and parade them one by one past a jury of right wing Bible beaters. And then my name will be the one besmirched beyond recognition. I'll lose my studio and I'll be forced to move back in with my grandmother. And I'll be damned if I live out the rest of my days running epsom salt foot baths and watching Wheel of Fortune with my grandmother, bless her heart! Plus, even if you charge Avery with something less serious, you'll get all of his mullet-buddies breathing down my neck, steering their pick-ups at me in the Piggly Wiggly parking lot, and I just might not make it out with my tutu on straight."

Sharon moved in with me after that. Thank God for her angel soul. I couldn't walk much, so she did pretty much everything from holding me steady while I perched on the pot, to taking over four dance classes by herself. I would have gone to watch some of the classes if I hadn't looked so scary. Took about three months for all the bones in my face to heal, and for the nerves to stabilize themselves. Then I had to wait for the dental repairs until the insurance accepted the claim as accidental. Those precious girls and their mamas arranged for me to get flowers every single day for two months. The third year class gave me a life-sized drawing of themselves in yellow tutus and red boas with a big "We miss you Uncle Vicky" written at the top in gold glitter. And the fifth year girls made me a video with each one of them soloing perfectly to my favorite Madonna and Abba songs. The grand finale was a group shot of them singing "Dancing Queen" into hairbrushes and wooden spoons. It was enough to make a grown man cry. It still gets me now, just to think about it.

Of course, I'm all better now. I asked Sharon to stay anyway, and she did for a while. Until she met Curtis. Curtis Mahoney is just a darling man—all-American and hunky like a Ken doll. I totally approve of him for Sharon. She was afraid to tell us about each other at first because she didn't want to be forced to choose between loving me and loving him. When Curtis was fine with our relationship, I knew it would be okay.

They're just down the street from me now. They have me over for pie and board games all the time. He's a man's man, don't get me wrong, but he truly has a heart of gold. He even takes my jokes for jokes and doesn't get weirded out by me even when I decide to drag myself up to the utmost outrageous three-foot bee-hive I can muster. He doesn't bat an eye, even when me and Sharon pronounce Mahoney like Ma Honey. It

was quite the funniest thing I ever saw when us girls talked him into being a nun for Halloween. Of course we made him wear fishnet stockings under his habit, and he obliged us that, but he insisted upon black wing-tips instead of black pumps, saying, "These are more practical. Nuns are practical."

It was over a game of Hearts one night that Curtis asked me why I didn't have a boyfriend.

"Well, honey, most men are just about sex—no offense. And I'm not. I'm really just one of the girls. The men I've known are users and abusers and are anything but honest with themselves. I just don't respect that. And now that I'm pushing 39 for the third time, I just respect myself more than that." And I do. That was a hard-learned truth.

"But what if you met the right guy who wasn't about sex and wasn't an abuser?" Curtis acted like he was really, sincerely concerned for my happiness.

"Oh, Curtis, truth be told, I really don't like the gay thing. I'm fine without a partner. I've got the moon and the stars and Miss Dangergirl to keep me company. We're just fine, aren't we, sweetheart?" I was trying to play it cool, you know, but he just wouldn't let it drop.

"But don't you want to share your life with someone? Maybe with a woman, if not a man?" Curtis had stopped playing the game and now seemed really concerned about the situation of my life.

So, I had no choice but to lay it all down for him.

When I was twenty-five, I was living in New York, trying to make it on Broadway. I shared this rinky-dink two bedroom flat with seven other dancers, all women. We had

so much fun and I ended up falling in love with Dana Grayson. She was blonde and leggy and had a heart as big as Dallas and we would dance together—you know, the Latin dances: mambo, merengue, tango, salsa. We would go out to clubs as hired dancers for people to watch and we were hot, honey—made money hand over fist, especially when we worked the crowd. Gawd, I'm not one prone to getting boners, but that girl could do it to me every damn time. Which may be why we made so much money, come to think of it.

Anyway, one night after a show we did for this huge private party downtown, we were both drunk on margaritas and horny as hell. She still smelled like her gardenia perfume and had this crazy sexy light in her eyes. We ended up fooling around, tongues and sweat and hands and all, but she stopped me. And with tears in her eyes she said, "I can't do this to you, Vic. You mean too much to me. We won't be friends afterwards if we go through with this. I'll hurt you."

So, I was all like "You can't hurt me," this and that.

And I'll never forget, she caught my hands, held them to her cheeks and said, "As much as I know how good it would feel to go through with this, it will change everything between us and it would never work out because I am a lesbian."

Okay, so I was floored, jaw down to here, laid out flat and sucking wind. I swear she never ever even glanced at the other chicks and certainly never brought a girlfriend around. She was with me like 24-7.

So, she was like, "I'm drawn to you because you are so sweet and passionate, and frankly, a lot like a woman. But I…I can't be with a man." I remember how she kissed her own tears off my palms. Turns out, she had been abused by her father all of

her life and had a complete aversion to the act of sex with men. I was safe, you know, but not that safe. So, we ended up sort of like a couple, just that we never had sex. I mean I tried to…be intimate with her in other ways, but she couldn't handle it because I was a man. I spent a lot of frustrated nights holding her because that's what she wanted, but I loved her so much, I just didn't care. And that's the truth, isn't it Dangergirl? Yes, it is. It surely, surely is.

So anyway, it was like six months later when it hit me one day. I could become a woman. You know, just a little snip here, a little hormone cocktail there, maybe some silicone in the breastal area. Because if I was a woman, then Dana wouldn't have a problem being with me in whatever way we wanted to be. I brought the idea up to her, and at first she was like "no way!" but I think after she thought about it for a week or so, it seemed to make sense. I mean we really loved each other, it was just that pesky penis of mine and its sneaky cohort, testosterone, getting in the way.

We went together to a specialist somewhere in New Jersey who had supposedly done this operation for hundreds of little hermaphrodite kids and about three hundred adult men. He, you know, gave us diagrams and charts and lists of drugs I would need to take and the price range we'd have to consider. It would be a two-year process including pre and post-op counseling before I would physically be a woman. So, I looked at her, she looked at me, and it seemed like a good idea. I got the hormone prescriptions right away and started scrimping for the operation.

Well, as crazy as it sounds, we didn't really stop to consider how it might change our lives, especially my career as a dancer. The estrogen worked pretty quickly, actually. Within a week my skin was smoother, my beard was growing in much finer

than normal, and in three weeks I started getting little titties. Unfortunately, since I was a male dancer, my strength had been a key asset for ballet and jazz numbers where lifts were required. Well, sooner than I'd expected, my muscles just flat out disappeared and I mysteriously started developing hips.

Dana liked it—was even more comfortable and open with me than normal, but I had to quit our gig at this show off-Broadway because I couldn't carry my partner, Cheryl, more than two steps. I shopped around for dance jobs, instructors, trainers, whatever but the market was so tight, I ended up becoming a freaking receptionist for some lame-ass realty agency and Dana ended up getting a top spot in Cats (you know, back in the eighties when it first hit?). And even though we were still together and in love, I couldn't for the life of me get a job doing what I loved. I even tried dancing as a woman, but I turned out to be a butt-ass ugly woman and my body was too broad, anyway.

So, I just decided one day…I remember it was Monday and I was in my little girly business suit, crammed on the subway, nose to armpit with ten other people when I realized I had to quit the hormones. I just couldn't live a life this miserable. So, I quit without telling Dana. In three weeks, I was back to looking like myself and I started auditioning for dance jobs again. Dana couldn't cope with it at all. She knew it had been a stupid idea from the beginning and we spent the next two weeks crying and apologizing and crying some more. But I just couldn't lose myself to her hang-ups that way. I just could not go there. So, we parted ways. And after that, all my relationships seemed to be tainted or off in the sexual arena. Instead of pretending to be someone I'm not, I just decided to swear it all off—the whole romantic relationship thing. It's not

that bad since I have good friends like you two, and all my precious ballerina girls, and of course, little Miss Dangergirl. Who's my sweet puppy? Who is it? Miss Dangergirl is who!

All Curtis could say after that was "Wow." Sharon had heard the tale before and came over to me with a big piece of lemon meringue, my favorite. She kissed me on the forehead and whispered, "I love you just the way you are, Vic."

I guess it would be difficult for some people to cope with the loneliness that comes creeping around in the middle of the night—that mysterious voice that tells you you need someone to touch you, to want you, to taste, and to feel next to you in the morning. But I'm okay with that voice haunting me. I just somehow know…whoever it is I'm missing, I'm not going to find him or her in this lifetime.

The alternative way of life (and by alternative I mean living alone), when you delete that part of the suburban manifest destiny bullshit we were all fed through the Cleavers and the Bradys and Father Knows Best from it, it is still full of love and closeness and beauty and dreams and shooting stars and good summer shoe sales and the whole ball of foil. I just happen to know that life is not all wine and roses—sometimes it's so fucking hard, it makes eating bullets sound like the breakfast of champions. But when you survive, you've got scars, and every single one has a freaky-ass story to go with it—and every freaky trip made you that much stronger, that much wiser, and that much more grounded in this existence on this crazy-ass planet.

So until the drag queen of death comes around bumping to the Disco Inferno, I'll be dancing my own way through life surrounded by cute ballerina chickies, and precious folks like Sharon and Curtis, and even more precious baby dogs like Miss Dangergirl.

Isn't that right? My baby Dangergirl. She's my favoritest of them all. No one I'd rather tango with. If that drag lady comes wanting me to boogie down to the Inferno, you're going to come with me, right, sweet pup? Of course you are. Because Miss Dangergirl loves her daddy. Yes, she does.